

A Worn Path Study Guide

A Worn Path by Eudora Welty

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Introduction

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," first published in *Atlantic Monthly* in February, 1941, is the tale of Phoenix Jackson's journey through the woods of Mississippi to the town of Natchez. The story won an O. Henry Prize the year it was published and later appeared in Welty's collection *The Wide Net*. Since then, it has been frequently anthologized. At first the story appears simple, but its mythic undertones and ambiguity gives a depth and richness that has been praised by critics. Welty has said that she was inspired to write the story after seeing an old African-American woman walking alone across the southern landscape. In "A Worn Path," the woman's trek is spurred by the need to obtain medicine for her ill grandson. Along the way, Phoenix encounters several obstacles and the story becomes a quest for her to overcome the trials she faces, which mirror her plight in society at large. The story is one of the best examples of Welty's writing, which is known for its realistic portrayal of the American South, particularly during the depression.



Author Biography

Eudora Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi, to Christian Webb and Chestina Andrews Welty. Her father was an insurance company president. She attended Mississippi State College for Women for a year and graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1929 with a major in English literature. She also attended the Columbia University Graduate School of Business where she studied advertising. After graduation, the Great Depression hampered her ability to find a job in her chosen field, so she worked as a part-time journalist and copywriter at newspapers and radio stations near her home in Mississippi. She also acquired a job as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographer, a job that took her on assignments throughout Mississippi. The experience of traveling throughout the South in order to observe people gave her the impetus to begin writing stories. Her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," was accepted in the journal *Manuscript*, and within two years her work was being accepted in many publications, including the *Atlantic* and the *Southern Review*.

Welty has never married, and despite stints in Wisconsin in college and New York City as a member of the *New York Times Book Review* staff, Welty has lived on Pinehurst Street in Jackson most of her life. Her fiction reveals these deep ties to the South, and though often set in Mississippi, her stories reveal truths about the human condition that transcend region. Welty has published several collections of short stories, six novels, and has tried her hand at plays, poems, and children's books. Welty's published photographs also reveal an artist with a sharp eye for detail and compassionate treatment of her subjects. Winner of the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, several O. Henry Awards, two American Book Awards, and numerous others, Eudora Welty has established herself as one of the most admired fiction writers of the twentieth century.



Plot Summary

The story opens on a chilly December morning. An elderly African-American woman named Phoenix Jackson is making her way, slowly but surely, through the woods, tapping an umbrella on the ground in front of her as she walks. Her shoes are untied. While she taps along, she talks to the animals in the woods, telling them to keep out of her way. As the path goes up a hill, she complains about how difficult walking becomes. It becomes evident that she has made this journey many times before; she is familiar with all the twists and turns in the trail. She talks aimlessly to herself. Her eyesight is poor, and she catches her skirt in the thorns on a bush.

After walking across a log to traverse a stream, she rests. She imagines a boy bringing her a slice of cake but opens her eyes to find her hand in the air, grasping nothing. The terrain becomes more difficult, and at a certain point she thinks she sees a ghost, but it is only a scarecrow. Blaming the confusion on her age and the fact that her "senses is gone," she moves on. She meets a black dog with a "lolling tongue." She hits the dog lightly with her cane, and the effort knocks her off balance and she falls into a ditch.

The dog's owner, a white hunter, happens by and helps her out of the ditch. When he hears that she is attempting to make it into town, he says it is too far and tells her to go home. But Phoenix is determined, and the hunter laughs, saying "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus." While he is laughing, a nickel falls out of his pocket. While he momentarily turns his attention to his dogs, she snatches the nickel from the ground. When he returns, he points the gun at her and asks if it scares her. After she tells him that it does not, he leaves her and she continues walking. Finally she reaches Natchez, where the Christmas bells are ringing and the town is festooned with decorations. She asks a white woman to tie her shoe, and the woman obliges.

Arriving at her destination, the woman climbs a set of stairs and enters a doctor's office. The attendant assumes Phoenix is a charity case. The nurse replies that it is "just old Aunt Phoenix" who has come to get medicine for her grandson. Phoenix remains silent as the nurse asks her questions. The nurse eventually loses patience and urges the old woman to "tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over." Phoenix snaps out of her daze when a "flame of comprehension" comes to her. She explains what the nurse already knows, that her grandson swallowed lye and now needs medicine periodically to soothe his throat. The nurse offers Phoenix a few pennies, to which she responds "Five pennies is a nickel." After the nurse gives her the nickel, she lays her two nickels side by side in her hand and then leaves the office to buy her grandson a paper windmill.



Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"A Worn Path" is about a journey an old, black woman takes in a very cold day in December. She is walking towards a far away town, a difficult path for an older lady, but she is on an important mission. She is wearing a nice dark striped dress. On top of that she wears an apron made of sugar sacks. The dress is just long enough to cover the top of her little laced shoes, which have become unlaced. Until the end of her journey, each step she makes is treacherous.

The woman, Phoenix Jackson, is quite ancient, so old she herself has forgotten. She is a tiny woman. She wears a red rag around her head, her still black hair dribbling down in frail, little ringlets. She is wrinkled and ancient, but there is a golden color in her face. There is life there and you can see it her in her gait. She carries with her a cane that was originally an umbrella. She taps the ground in front of her as she walks, tapping and tapping as she goes. There is persistence to her tapping and to the steps she retreads on her journey.

There is movement in front of her from time to time, a quivering, and a shaking of the bushes. She is bold as she addresses the animals in the thicket, telling the foxes and beetles and rabbits to get out of her way. She doesn't care or expect human beings to be listening. She tells the wild hogs to keep away from her because she has a long way to go. She switches at the brush with her cane as she walks- as though she is walking with a machete in the jungle. She marches alone the pinewoods, amidst their dark shadows. Sometimes, looking up, she sees the pine needles glistening brightly; sometimes, she hears the pinecones dropping lightly on the forest floor. She is part of the tableau she is traversing. It is quiet. It is often dark. This is a well-worn path. She hears the sound of a mourning dove. He is there in the winter, still awake, still pitching out his mournful song.

Now, she has to proceed up a hill. It is a difficult going. She seems, at this point, to have chains around her feet. She contemplates the difficulty of her situation. Soon this point will be over and she will find her forest legs again. Now, she has to go through oak trees instead of pines. Along the way, she gets all tangled up in a thorny bush. It looked just like a nice little green bush, but it took a lot of care to extricate herself. She has to be very careful. As she untangles one skirt, she has to contend with another. Finally, she is done, completely untangled- but then she looked at the sun and it was getting late. She has a quality of persistence and she will take each step on journey but will not stop.

Now, she has to cross a creek. This is challenging for her, but she does, carefully lifting her skirt that she has salvaged from the green bush, marching across the creek, stepping proudly on the log. Finally, across the creek, she allows herself to rest. She spreads her skirts around her. She folds her hands. She tries to keep her eyes open, but she is very tired. She sits underneath a tree laced with mistletoe. For a moment, she



thinks she sees a boy offer a piece of cake, but then it was just a thought, a temporary illusion. She gets up to continue her journey.

Now, she must deal with a barbed wire fence. Struggling a bit, she has to crawl under it, talking to herself. She had to, above all else, protect her dress. On the entire journey, she probably is more afraid of hurting her dress than any other concern. Animals or people hardly concern her. Finally, as she passed through that trial, she went into a clearing where a buzzard watched her. She crossed the field, thankful it was not time for the bulls and that the snakes slept during the winter. She has little to fear on this cold day in December.

Now, it was time to pass through a field. There are strange sounds. She cannot see anything because the corn is above her. Somewhere in the dead corn, a moving, living thing dances abstractedly in the sunshine. It lack and skinny, moving relentlessly before her. At first, she thought it was a ghost but addresses it tentatively. She had not heard of any death here recently. Could this truly be a ghost? But as she moves closer, she laughs when she finds a coat and a handful of emptiness- a scarecrow left to tyrannize the imaginary crows that would never come in the winter in a place of dead corn. She walks forward until she comes to the quail. There, she hits a remembered path.

The path led her through empty fields and by silver trees, through old, worn cabins with boarded windows- until she finally got to a ravine where she saw water flowing through a hollow log. She tasted the sweet water, which came from sweet-gum. She crossed a swampy section where she mumbled a happy sleep to the alligators and then into a dark part of the road. She thinks of them blowing out tiny bubble from their snouts as they sleep below the marshes.

There, suddenly, a black dog startles her and she falls into a ditch. There is nothing much she can do. She lay there for a while until a young white man came, a hunter with his dog. He graciously helps her up. She tells him she is like "a June bug waiting to be burned over." Is she all right? Her fall was gentle- into some old weeds. She told him how faraway she lived and he was amazed. He only went there to hunt and she could see he had caught a bob-white, which he carried in his bag. It was Christmas and he bet she was going there to see Santa Claus.

However, as he laughed, she noticed a nickel fell out of his pocket. He asked her age. She said she didn't know. He can see she is afraid of the black dog that scared her. Therefore, he and his dog go after it. There are sounds of dogs fighting. She hears the man running. Then she hears a gunshot. While they're away, she carefully bends forward until she captures the silver coin and carefully puts it in her pocket. When the man comes back, she asked him if she was afraid of the gunshot. She says, no, she is used to it. He would like to give her money, but he has none. Then he leaves. She now continues her journey, arriving finally in the town, the sound of his gunshots echoing in the distance.

It is Christmas time in this small town. Owing to her condition, she asks a lady to lace up her shoes. She thanks the lady and proceeds to a door. She enters and is interrogated



as to the nature of her case. The lady becomes more and more impatient. She hears her, but she says nothing. The lady is rude to her. She asks her what her problem is? She asks if she has been there before. Phoenix responds to her questions only by twitching silently. She asks her if she is deaf? The woman becomes more abusive. She is now raising her voice. Phoenix just stares straight ahead. She is beginning to sweat. Her wrinkles shine in the light.

A nurse finally comes in and recognizes her. She has come far. From Old Natchez Place. She comes here regularly. However, Phoenix is not very responsive. Has she not come for the boy? For her grandson? The nurse asks. How is his throat? She doesn't answer their questions for a while, but then comes to life. Her memory had failed her. Her grandson had swallowed lye some time ago and it has not healed. She has come for the medicine. He is alone, waiting for her to come back. He needs the medicine for the throat has not healed in some time.

The nurse gets tired of her talking. She tries to get her to be quieter. She marks something down about "charity" and gets medicine for Phoenix Jackson. She asks if Phoenix would like some money? Phoenix says she would love to have five pennies. For her answer, she gets another nickel. Now she can go to the store and get her little son a paper windmill. He will be amazed by it. She walks out of the office and goes downstairs, slowly.

Analysis

If "A Worn Path" is anything, it is a kind of portrait. If a short story were to need a plot, "A Worn Path" is not a story. There is no suspense; no dramatic curve, no climax and the characters are remarkably faceless except for the protagonist. Her face, in fact, is described in great detail as are her clothes- her cane, her apron, her skirts, her shoes.

Still, despite the almost minute descriptions of Phoenix Jackson's appearance, her demeanor, her manner of talking, we know remarkably little about her until the last moment of her journey, when she arrives in some kind of medical welfare office. And the funny thing about that- upon arriving at her goal, the trip which has cost her so much trouble and travail, she has a lapse of memory concerning her raison d'etre for visiting the doctor's office.

It is a powerful mission. She is trying to help her grandson get medicine. She goes through this long journey "like clockwork." Even the aggravated nurse and the young hunter are aware of her long journey. Yet, at the end, she forgets and then is startled somehow back into remembrance.

During her whole long trek in the woods, her talks with the critters of the forest, her salute to the sleeping alligators, her scary encounter with a black dog, her soft fall into a ditch from which she can't move to extract herself, her confrontation with the scarecrow ghost, the difficulties with entangling herself from her thorny bush, there is not one mention of the purpose of her journey. Nor is there really any mention of her history. She



is just old, ancient- with a characteristic gait and a magnificent persistence in the face of her frailty- but she could have just sprung into existence without any backup story as far as this portrait is concerned.

We note how she is a little sneaky, when she co-opts the hunter's nickel, which has fallen from his pocket. Is it because he mentions something about the "old colored people" at Christmas? Does she not like his words? On the other hand, is it because he says he wishes he had money to give her, but she knows he has? It's hard to say. Grandma Jackson not only does not have any history, she is fairly motiveless. If she has a motive to her actions, the author is not telling.

The ending of the story includes the temporary loss of memory, the amnesia. One almost gets the impression that Phoenix is operating, indeed, without history and motive. She has been wound up a long time ago and unwinds her actions in a continual, unrelenting straight line but without much self-knowledge.

Is this supposed to be a commentary on old age? Is she an archetype of a level of existence downtrodden by Nature and so thwart with frailties that her strengths, her concerns and her purposes are largely clock-like and mechanical, a remnant of some spring of survival inside of her when her identity has largely failed?

Does her journey represent courage without purpose, determination without motivation with a touch of superstition and humor without any depth? It is hard to say because there is very little here to grab a hold of. In a certain way, "A Worn Path" not only lacks plot, climax and development of story, but it lacks character.

It is a flat portrait, painted out of the Old South. But with all these missing elements, its reality is quite convincing and the journey of Ms. Phoenix Jackson is memorable in its sharp, crisp images and its unflattering portrayal of old age and the withering of the human mind. It is also persuasive that this woman, reduced to a semblance of her former self by the gravity of her years, still clings carefully to her life and property and does the best she can, mechanically or not, as she winds forward in her journey.

This is not a pleasant or a particularly interesting tale. Nevertheless, as a portrait, it has its memorable moments. The canvas was painted carefully with a small brush with great attention to color and with carefully hewn forms. There is definitely an art here to be reckoned but perhaps not the art of conventional storytelling.



Characters

The Grandson

Phoenix's grandson does not appear in the story, but his medical condition is the reason for the old woman's journey. Having swallowed lye (a strong alkaline substance used in making soap) several years ago, the boy's throat is permanently damaged. His grandmother is the only relative he has left, and she makes the trip to town to receive medicine that soothes the pain. There has been no change in his condition, Phoenix tells the nurse, he sits with his "mouli open like a little bird." She also says that though he suffers, he has "a sweet look." Though Phoenix says he is not dead, some critics have theorized that he is.

The Hunter

The hunter encounters Phoenix after she has fallen into a ditch, the unfortunate result of an encounter with one of his dogs. He helps her up, demonstrating his willingness to assist a person in need. But his subsequent conversation with her reveals his disrespect for her and biased attitudes towards African Americans in general. When he learns that she intends to walk to town, he assumes Phoenix is not able to make the long journey and he tells her to go home; he has no qualms about issuing the order. But when she persists, he relents, assuming that the only reason "old colored people" would embark on such a long trail would be to see Santa Claus. In a second instance of disrespect, he tells Phoenix that he would give her a dime if he had one, unaware that Phoenix has already picked up the nickel that fell out of his pocket. In a third example, he points a gun at her face and asks if it scares her. He is amused by the fact that it does not, further emphasizing his insensitivity. Throughout the conversation, he refers to her as "Granny," as the other characters do, all of whom are unwilling to look beyond Phoenix's age and see her as an individual.

Phoenix Jackson

Old Phoenix Jackson is the protagonist of the story. She is described in vivid colors, suggesting her lively nature: she wears a red rag in her hair and her skin is described as "yellow," "golden" and "copper." Her age is indicated by the way she moves—slowly, in small steps, with the assistance of a cane—and by the wrinkles on her face, which form "a pattern all its own ... as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead." Because of her frailty, her determination to continue on her journey highlights her resilience and perseverance. Old Phoenix sees the Natchez Trace as an obstacle course, one that she tolerates with a fair sense of humor, despite her lapses into senility. She tells the animals to stay out of her way. Her dress gets caught in a thorny bush, and she tells the thorns "you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no



sir." When a dog causes her to fall into a ditch she cannot climb out of, she simply awaits help—her sense of determination never succumbs to defeat.

When Phoenix is finally rescued by the white hunter, she suffers his indignations with stoic resolve. He tells her to go home and finally assumes that the purpose of her long journey is to see Santa Claus. Phoenix does not feel the need to ingratiate herself to him by explaining the purpose for her trip, however. Yet her willingness to take advantage of him for her own gain is demonstrated by her quick response to the nickel falling out of his pocket. However, her conscience bothers her: "God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing." Ultimately, the hunter displays his disregard for her by pointing his hunting rifle at her. Phoenix remains unflustered. But she is not beyond asking for help. When she gets to town she asks a woman to tie her shoes for her. "I doesn't mind asking a nice lady to tie up my shoe," she says, indicating that her pride does not interfere with her humility. Still, Phoenix suffers insults: the woman calls her "Grandma," and the nurse at the doctor's office tells her "You mustn't take up our time this way."

In addition to remaining undaunted by the demeaning comments of others, Phoenix perseveres in the face of senility as well. During her trek, she imagines a boy bringing her a slice of cake and is startled back to reality by the sight of her arm grasping the air. At the doctor's office, the nurse speaks to her at first to no avail: "It was my memory had left me" she says finally, "There I sat and forgot why I made my long trip." When her mission is revealed—to get medicine for her grandson—Phoenix's determination is immediately apparent. She has made the journey selflessly, for someone else's sake. "We is the only two left in the world," she says, revealing her strong commitment to her family and her sacrificing nature.

Phoenix's name is symbolic of the mythological bird who rises from its own ashes to begin another cycle of life. The old woman's name thus suggests her timelessness and the fact that she can never be suppressed, even by those who would try to break her spirit.

The Nurse

The nurse reveals information about Phoenix Jackson that the reader does not know during the course of her journey. Thus, her conversation with Phoenix is the climax of the story. The nurse, who represents society's general attitudes, displays some sensitivity towards the woman, assuring the attendant that "Old Aunt Phoenix... doesn't come for herself—she has a little grandson." Even so, the nurse treats the old woman with the same sense of belittlement that other characters in the story have. "You mustn't take up our time this way," she says, exasperated when the woman lapses into a spell of forgetfulness, "Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over." Like the other people on Phoenix's obstacle-course journey, the nurse prefers not to give Phoenix too much respect since she is old, African American, and a woman. Thus, in the nurse's eyes, Phoenix is not entitled to all the respect granted others in society.



Themes

Race and Racism

Issues of race often inform Welty's fiction for the fact that so much of her fiction is set in Mississippi during the 1940s and 1950s. Phoenix's brief encounters on her journey typify the views of many Southern whites during the era. A white hunter helps her out of a ditch but patronizes her and trivializes her journey: "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!" He also taunts her by pointing his loaded gun at her and asking, "Doesn't the gun scare you?" Through these exchanges, Welty shows how some whites regarded blacks. He also calls her "Granny," a term common for older African-American women. Often whites would call older blacks "Aunt," "Granny," or "Uncle" as a way of denying them their dignity and individuality. In another example of this, the nurse calls her "aunt Phoenix" instead of the more formal "Mrs. Jackson." Although no one in the story is actually rude or discriminatory towards Phoenix, Welty demonstrates the subtle persecutions that blacks suffer in a white world.

Duty and Responsibility

Phoenix Jackson is mobilized by her sense of duty to her grandson. Because she is the only person her grandson has to rely on—"We is the only two left in the world," she tells the nurse—she is determined to make it to town to obtain the medicine that will soothe his injured throat. Her sense of responsibility dominates her personality, overcoming her encroaching senility, her poor eyesight, and her difficulty in walking. Phoenix relates her determination with a sense of urgency to the hunter: she tells the hunter: "I bound to go to town, mister.... The time come around." In the character of Phoenix, Welty relates the virtue in doing selfless things for others.

The nurse also has a duty and a responsibility to keep giving Phoenix the medicine as long as she keeps coming to get it. She says that "the doctor said as long as you came to get it, yqu could have it----But it's an obstinate case." The attendant gives Phoenix a nickel to spend, but she seems to do it out of a sense of duty because it is Christmas time.

Even the hunter, who helps Phoenix out of the ditch, and the young woman on the street, who ties her shoes, seem to act out of duty, not out of compassion or love. Only Phoenix's actions—making the arduous journey into town for her grandson—transcend responsibility and are motivated by a sense of true love.

Guilt

A minor theme in "A Worn Path" concerns guilt and innocence. Phoenix feels guilty when she picks up the nickel that falls from the pocket of the white hunter. She indicates in her words to the hunter that she believes that she deserves to be shot for the offense:



"I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done." Even though the hunter has lied to her, claiming that he does not have any money, she knows it is not right to retaliate through artifice on her own part. However, other actions that should inspire guilt—the hunter aiming a loaded gun at her face, for instance—do not. The attendant at the doctor's office, perhaps feeling guilty for her impatient comment, "Are you deaf?" may be offering amends when she gives Phoenix the nickel. The symbol of innocence in the story is surely the grandson, a helpless young boy who is unable to care for himself and whose throat periodically closes up, causing him to gasp for breath. His innocence is protected by the caring and love his grandmother provides. Readers wonder, knowing how old and frail Phoenix is, what will become of him once she dies and he is left without anyone to care for him.

Resurrection

Phoenix's name points to the theme of resurrection in "A Worn Path." The phoenix was the bird in ancient mythology that rose from its own ashes every 500 years to begin a new life cycle. Phoenix Jackson, whose statement that she was "too old at the Surrender" to go to school—1865—hints that she is probably over eighty at the time the story takes place, but she refuses to die or give up. Phoenix's ritual journey into town symbolizes the continual rising-up of the old woman, like the bird she is allied with. Her description given at the beginning of the story also seems to suggest fire and life: "a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper."

Style

Point of View

"A Worn Path" is told from a third-person limited point of view. This allows the reader to empathize with Phoenix, because her thoughts and actions are shown. Yet, in third-person, the reader is allowed to view Phoenix from a distance, and thereby see her as others see her.

Symbolism

The most obvious symbol in the story is Phoenix Jackson's comparison to the mythological bird, the phoenix. Dressed in vivid colors, Phoenix's resilience is underscored by her comparison with a bird that rises from the ashes every 500 years. Additionally, Phoenix's grandson is described by the woman as "[wearing] a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird."

Similes

Welty has been praised from early on for her use of language. In using similes, she makes vivid comparisons that help the reader form a mental picture of the action. Similes are direct comparisons that use words such as "like" or "as" to link the two ideas. One such simile in this story occurs in the description of Phoenix Jackson's face: "Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead ____" The narrator describes her cane as being "limber as a buggy whip." As Phoenix walks across the log, she looks "like a festival figure in some parade." She encounters big dead trees "like black men with one arm." Other similes in the story appeal to various senses, such as smell: "she gave off perfume like the red roses in the summer," In touching the scarecrow, Phoenix finds "a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice."

Setting

Setting is crucial to the purpose of this story because Welty conceived the idea for the tale of Phoenix Jackson as she sat with a painter friend out on the Old Natchez Trace. The Trace is an old highway that runs from Nashville, Tennessee, to Natchez, Mississippi. By 1800 it was the busiest in the American South. Phoenix lives "away back off the Old Natchez Trace," as the nurse in the doctor's office says. This indicates that Phoenix lives fairly far from Natchez, which means that the journey—compounded by the fact that it is December—is difficult for her. In the rural area, she encounters animals, thorny bushes, ditches, streams to be crossed by logs, barbed-wire fences, and even people. These obstacles underscore how deeply she cares and sacrifices for her grandson. When the narrator tells us at the end of the story that "her slow step



began on the stairs, going down," it indicates that she is faced with a return journey as arduous as the one she just completed. Time is also important in the story: Phoenix says that she was "too old at the Surrender" to go to school. If the story takes place in the time it was written, 1941, Phoenix would be anywhere from 80 to 100 years old. This further magnifies the intensity of her journey and the tragic situation of her grandson's dependence on her.

Conflict

Every work of fiction has some kind of conflict, and most obvious one in "A Worn Path" is Phoenix's struggle against nature and the landscape. The determination Phoenix shows when faced with various hardships on her path help define her character for the reader. Other outward conflicts in the story result from her encounters with the hunter and with the attendant in the doctor's office. The hunter teases her and points a gun at her; Phoenix remains calm and steady, causing the hunter to exclaim "Well, Granny,, you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing." The conflict with the office attendant serves to show another side of Phoenix, her dignity in the face of racial and age discrimination. She refuses to speak to the condescending woman until the nurse comes in and explains who she is. When the attendant, possibly out of guilt, offers to give Phoenix a few pennies from her purse, Phoenix "stiffly" says, "Five pennies is a nickel." Through the use of the conflicts, which seem ordinary, Welty shows how daily life can be a struggle for someone like Phoenix.

Historical Context

Welty's "A Worn Path" was published in 1941, the same year the United States entered World War II, Europe had already been involved in the conflict for several years since Adolph Hitler began enlarging Germany's empire. Germany declared war on the United States in December, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the U.S.'s declaration of war against Japan. Set against the brewing global conflict, Welty's tale of rural life in the South may seem out of context for the times. Phoenix Jackson's world is much smaller than the global world of international warfare. Her world revolves around her home, her grandson, and the rural life of Natchez, Mississippi.

The story was inspired in part by the work Welty was doing in the early 1940s for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was established by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1934 as a way to put many unemployed people to work building necessary infrastructure—bridges, dams, power plants—to make the country a modern and efficient world power. Welty was a photographer for the WPA, which also included many arts programs, and as she observed an elderly black woman laboriously crossing a field, the idea for "A Worn Path" emerged. Poverty during these years was a reality for many, particularly for blacks and particularly for rural Southerners. Phoenix Jackson was both of these. Quite possibly, Phoenix was old enough to have been born into slavery, or at the very least into the era of sharecropping that followed. Most tobacco and cotton plantations—two of the primary industries of the South at the turn of the century—were owned by wealthy whites who allowed the blacks to work for them in return for an overpriced room and board of meagre proportions. For her generation, their economic situation was grim, and it was only exacerbated by the Great Depression. Phoenix wears red rags in her hair and an apron of sugar sacks. At the clinic, the nurse writes "charity" next to her name. The two nickels Phoenix acquires in the story seem may have seemed like a small fortune to her, and the paper windmill she wants to buy for her grandson is most likely a luxury and quite possibly the only store-bought toy he would have received that year.

Critical Overview

Since its publication, Welty's story "A Worn Path" has found a responsive audience. One of the most widely anthologized stories of any American writer, the story of Phoenix Jackson's trip into town for her grandson's medicine has been praised both for its simplicity and for its depth. Although the story is brief and simple—the tale of an elderly black woman who travels into town—it contains a level of ambiguity that has fascinated readers for sixty years. Readers have wondered whether the grandson for whom Phoenix Jackson travels along the Natchez Trace is already dead when the story begins. Evidence within the story could support either interpretation, and Welty has said herself only that at least Phoenix believes that he is alive. She says that Phoenix must believe that her journey is in pursuit of life, not death.

Welty's stories are set in the South, and thus her characters' region is often distinguished by their speech and habits; however, Welty's themes transcend regional boundaries and have universal appeal. Critics responded to her first collection, *A Curtain of Green*, favorably and predicted that she would continue to write engaging fiction. With her second collection of stories, *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, critics such as Diana Trilling and Robert Penn Warren noticed that Welty's fiction was becoming richer in theme and allusion. Critics began to call her style impressionistic since she often uses metaphor and symbol to convey her meaning. Warren said that "the items of fiction {scene, action, character, etc.} are presented not as document but as comment, not as report but as a thing made, not as history but as idea."

Through the 1940s Welty continued to refine her vision for her work, and her third collection *The Golden Apples* won many critics over with its highly symbolic complexity, quite different from the simple regional stories with which she began. In the 1950s she published another collection of short stories, *The Bride of Innisfallen*, and won the William Dean Howells Medal of the Academy of Arts and Letters for her novella *The Ponder Heart*. Welty wrote little during the 1960s, but after a period of traveling and lecturing, she returned to writing with two novels, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Although her last stories were written in 1955, the publication in 1980 of the *Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* verifies her standing as one of the most popular story writers of her era.

Robert Penn Warren, in an important essay in 1944, wrote that Welty writes her stories as if "the author cannot be quite sure what did happen, cannot quite undertake to resolve the meaning of the recorded event, cannot, in fact, be too sure of recording all of the event." In other words, Welty presents an ambiguous situation in her stories and is not concerned about answering all the questions she raised. Using point of view carefully so as not to reveal too much, Welty has been praised for her ability to convey a strong sense of her character's emotions and experience at specific moments in time. Critics have responded well to her use of symbolism and allusion to communicate sensory impressions. In her fiction, Welty merges the everyday with the universal, and readers have been able to enter her world and feel at home.

Other elements of Welty's fiction that critics have praised include her skillful use of language and her diversity in content, form, and tone. While one would not call Welty an experimental writer like her fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, her fiction does contain a wide array of moods, subjects, and voices. While some of her stories are light, humorous, or even outright hilarious, such as "Why I Live at the P.O.," others are tragic and serious, such as "Clyde." Some critics have not responded well to Welty's use of the grotesque or absurd, as in the story "The Petrified Man," and some critics have questioned her approach to race issues, but most agree that her stories contain truth, as Eunice Glenn says, "making everyday life appear as it often does, without the use of a magnifying glass."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4



Critical Essay #1

Greg Barnhisel is an English literature scholar, educator, and writer. In the following essay, he discusses the implications of race in "A Worn Path."

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," written in 1940, is one of the author's most frequently anthologized stories, but this by no means indicates that it is her easiest. There is a depth of ambiguity in it. Twentieth-century critics have chosen, for the most part, to examine the role race plays in the story and through that to either condemn Welty or exalt her for her views. But race is certainly not the story's only concern. Questions of age, service, dedication, and myth also inform the story.

However, it is with race that any discussion of Welty's story must begin. Welty comes from Mississippi, in many ways the most notoriously troubled of Southern states. Born there in 1909 (to Northern parents), she grew up and has spent most of her life in Jackson. She grew up in an era where the Civil War and Reconstruction were still remembered by many of her neighbors, and she herself has lived through the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and the Southern renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s. However, politics very rarely enters her work directly. Her stories deal with race relations on a personal level.

Welty has discussed the genesis of "A Worn Path" in numerous interviews. The inspiration for Phoenix Jackson was an ancient black woman whom Welty saw walking across the countryside as Welty was sitting under a tree near the Natchez Trace with a painter friend. "I watched her cross that landscape in the half-distance," she explains, "and when I got home I wrote that story that she had made me think of." In another interview, she added that "I knew she was going somewhere. I knew she was bent on an errand, even at that distance. It was not anything casual. It was a purposeful, measured journey she was making—you wouldn't go on an errand like that—unless it were for someone else, you know. Unless it were an emergency."

"A Worn Path" traces the journey of an ancient black woman who walks to Natchez, Mississippi, in order to obtain medicine for her grandson, who permanently injured himself by swallowing lye. On this, most of her critics agree, but that is as far as they go. One group holds that Welty's portrayal of the black race through her main character, Phoenix Jackson, is eminently sympathetic; another feels that Welty shares with many other Southern writers a tendency to portray blacks as long-suffering and enduring, and in doing so robs them of their true complexity as human beings.

Crucial to any assessment of this question is whether Phoenix Jackson is intended to stand as a representative of her race. Certainly, she plays into one stereotypical Southern image of blacks: the ancient, plodding, superstitious grandmother who talks to herself. Welty seems to undercut this image by introducing the hunter, who treats Jackson as precisely that kind of a stereotype. "I know you old colored people!" he tells her. "Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!" He seems like a buffoon here, but when he drops his nickel and she picks it up, critics see the action as either



indicative of another pejorative stereotype of blacks (craftiness and dishonesty) or as illustrative of her superiority over him. Similarly, critics disagree on the significance of the white woman in Natchez tying Jackson's shoe. Is this an indication, as one critic holds, of "courtesy warranted by virtue of her age and her 'fealty' to the white race," or is it a comical representation of black helplessness?

The position that Welty's characterization of Jackson relies heavily on stereotypes is quite convincing. There is a long tradition of white Southern writers exalting the primitiveness of blacks: a move that, while not racist in intent (their primitiveness is used to teach more "sophisticated" whites about the virtues of simplicity), is somewhat demeaning in effect. If Jackson is meant to represent blacks as a whole, what are we to make of her "naivete and helplessness"? If her great age is in one respect an asset, does it not also suggest that blacks are changeless and eternal? The final words in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, "They endure," is his summary assessment of the state of blacks in the South. Certainly, he has respect for their "endurance," but is it not also patronizing to confer only this compliment upon an entire race of people? Welty's critics still wrestle over whether she grants blacks sufficient human diversity, or whether, like her fellow Mississippian Faulkner, she treats them too much as simple symbols of endurance.

Welty herself, in 1965, anticipated this conflict, and argued that it was off me mark. In her essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" she shifts the question, saying that the relationship between the races cannot be separated from other relationships between people. "There are relationships of blood, of the passions and affections, of thought and spirit and deed. This is the relationship between the races. How can one kind of relationship be set apart from the others? Like a great root system of an old and long-established growing plant, they are all tangled up together; to separate them you would have to cleave the plant itself from top to bottom." The very nature of her metaphor of the "long-established plant," though, seems to many critics to subtly defend a slow pace of change in the South: this situation is very old, she seems to be saying, and we cannot rush things.

The other primary approach to this story has been to examine its mythological underpinnings. Phoenix Jackson's name is a reference to the mythological "phoenix"—a mythical bird that lives in the desert for 500-600 years and then sets itself on fire, only to rise again from its own ashes, and is a popular symbol for immortality. Certainly, age plays a significant part in the story. If we accept that the story is set in Welty's present, i.e. at the time when story is suggestive of a religious pilgrimage, while the conclusion implies that the return trip will be like the journey of the Magi." she wrote the story, then the "present" is 1940. Jackson tells the scarecrow: "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know." When the hunter asks her how old she is, she replies, "There is no telling, mister." However, if what she tells the nurse is true—that she was too old to go to school when Lee surrendered in 1865—then she must be nearly a hundred years old. Yet, like the phoenix, she rises to makes periodic trips to Natchez to get medicine for her grandson.



The season in which the story takes place— Christmas time—reinforces the theme of rebirth. If we see the story as a Christian allegory, then the marble cake that Jackson dreams of suggests the Communion wafers and her crossing of the cornfield suggests the parting of the Red Sea. Also, the soothing medicine which she gives to her permanently sick grandson can be seen as God's grace, and Jackson herself as a Christ figure. In addition, the difficulties which Jackson endures on her way to Natchez can either represent the temptations of Christ in the desert or the stations of the cross.

A number of critics have questioned whether or not Jackson's grandson is even alive. The story is especially affecting if we know that he is already dead, Roland Bartel proposes, and Jackson's apparent bout of forgetfulness and senility in the doctor's office could be her nagging realization that her grandson is, in fact, dead. Welty responded personally to this question in a 1974 essay, acknowledging the possibility that Jackson's grandson is no longer alive, but insisting that she "must assume that the boy is alive" and admonishing readers that "it is the journey—that is the story." Given that, we must return to the story's mythological resonances. In addition to the aforementioned Christian parallels, the story also suggests Dante, the Italian author of the epic *Divine Comedy*. The dog, the hunter, and even the descent down the stairs at the end of the story parallel incidents in Dante's *Inferno*.

"A Worn Path" is finally a simple story, though. Welty's short tale of an old woman's journey to get medicine for her grandson is valuable simply as that, and the starkness of its simplicity is too often undervalued. That very simplicity gives it the ability to support so many political and mythological interpretations. Welty even suggests another, far more personal analogy for Phoenix's journey: her own journey towards the creation of "great fiction." "Like Phoenix, you work all your life to find your way, through all the obstructions and the false appearances and the upsets you may have brought on yourself, to reach a meaning—And finally too, like Phoenix, you have to assume that what you are working in aid of is life, not death."

Source: Greg Barnhisel, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.



Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, which originally appeared in the Sewanee Review in 1963, Isaacs shows how the deceptively "simple" story "A Worn Path" employs a number of meanings that make it more "densely complex" than it first appears.

The first four sentences of "A Worn Path" contain simple declarative statements using the simple past of the verb "to be": "It was December...," "... there was an old Negro woman...," "Her name was Phoenix Jackson," "She was very old and small...." The note of simplicity thus struck is the keynote of Eudora Welty's artistic design in the story. For it is a simple story (a common reaction is "simply beautiful"). But it is also a story which employs many of the devices which can make of the modern short story an intricate and densely complex form. It uses them, however, in such a way that it demonstrates how a single meaning may be enriched through the use of various techniques. Thus, instead of various levels of meaning, we have here a single meaning reinforced on several levels of perception. Moreover, there is no muddying of levels and techniques; they are neatly arranged, straightforwardly presented, and simply perceived.

The plot-line follows Phoenix Jackson, who is graphically described in the second paragraph, on her long walk into Natchez where she has to get medicine for her grandson. The trek is especially difficult because of her age, and in the process of struggling on she forgets the reason for the struggle. At the end she has remembered, received the medicine, and decided to buy the child a Christmas present with the ten cents she has acquired during the day.

What makes this a story? It barely appears to fulfill even Sidney Cox's generous criterion of "turning a corner or at least a hair." But it does belong to a specific storyteller's genre familiar from Homer to [Henry] Fielding to [Jack] Kerouac— "road" literature. This form provides a ready-made plot pattern with some inherent weaknesses. The story concerns the struggle to achieve a goal, the completion of the journey; and the story's beginning, middle, and end are the same as those of the road. The primary weakness of this structure is its susceptibility to too much middle.

A traditional concept of road literature, whether the mythical journey of the sun across the heavens or a boy's trip down the Mississippi or any other variation, is its implicit equation with life: the road of life, life's journey, ups and downs, the straight and narrow, and a host of other clichés reflect the universality of this primitive metaphor. "A Worn Path" makes explicit, beginning with the very title, Eudora Welty's acceptance of the traditional equation as a basic aspect of the story. In fact, the whole meaning of "A Worn Path" will rely on an immediate recognition of the equation—the worn path equals the path of life—which is probably why it is so explicit. But we needn't start with a concept which is metaphorical or perhaps primitively allegorical. It will probably be best for us to begin with the other literal elements in the story: they will lead us back to the sub- or supra-literal eventually anyway.



An important part of the setting is the time element, that is, the specific time of the year. We learn immediately that it is "a bright frozen day" in December, and there are several subsequent, direct statements which mark it more precisely as Christmas time. The hunter talks about Santa Claus and the attendant at the hospital says that "It's Christmas time," echoing what the author has said earlier. There are several other references and images forming a pattern to underline the idea of Christmas time, such as "Up above her was a tree in a pearly cloud of *mistletoe*." [Italics in this paragraph all mine.] Notice especially the elaborate color pattern of red, green, and *silver*, the traditional colors of Christmas. It begins with Phoenix's head "in a *red* rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods" (which are green as well as Christmas trees). Later she sees "a wagon track, where the *silver grass* blew between the redrnti" and "little strings of trees *silver* in their dead leaves" (reddish brown?). This pattern comes to a climax in the description of the city and the lady's packages, which also serves to make explicit its purpose, return it to the literal: "There were *red* and green electric lights strung and crisscrossed everywhere.....an armful of *red-*, *green-*, and *silver-*wrapped presents."

From the plot-line alone the idea of Christmas doesn't seem to be more than incidental, but it is obvious from the persistent references that Christmas is going to play an important part in the total effect of the story. Besides the direct statements already mentioned, there proliferates around the pattern throughout the story a dense cluster of allusions to and suggestions of the Christmas myth at large and to the *meanings* of Christmas in particular. For instance, as Phoenix rests under a tree, she has a vision of a little boy offering her a slice of marble-cake on a little plate, and she says, "That would be acceptable." The allusion here is to Communion and Church ritual. Later, when a bird flies by, Phoenix says, "God watching me the whole time." Then there are references to the Eden story (the ordering of the species, the snake in summer to be avoided), to the parting of the Red Sea (Phoenix walking through the field of corn), to a sequence of temptations, to the River Jordan and the City of Heaven (when Phoenix gets to the river, sees the city shining, and hears the bells ringing; then there is the angel who waits on her, tying her shoes), to the Christ-child in the manger (Phoenix describing her grandson as "all wrapped up" in "a little patch quilt... like a little bird" with "a sweet look"). In addition, the whole story is suggestive of a religious pilgrimage, while the conclusion implies that the return trip will be like the journey of the Magi, with Phoenix following a star (the marvelous windmill) to bring a gift to die child (medicine, also windmill). Moreover, there's the hunter who is, in part, a Santa Claus figure himself (he carries a big sack over his shoulder, he is always laughing, he brings Phoenix a gift of nickel).

The richness of all this evocation of a Christianity-Christmas frame of a reference heightens the specific points about the meanings of Christmas. The Christmas spirit, of course, is the Christian ethic in its simplest terms: giving, doing for others, charity. This concept is made explicit when the nurse says of Phoenix, "She doesn't come for herself." But it had already been presented in a brilliant piece of ironic juxtaposition [Italics mine]:



She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame which matched the dream that was hung up in her head,

"Here I be," she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body. "A charity case, I suppose," said an attendant

Amid the Christmas season and the dense Christmas imagery, Phoenix, with an abiding intuitive faith, arrives at the shrine of her pilgrimage, beholds a symbolic crucifixion, presents herself as a celebrant in the faith, and is recognized as an embodiment of the message of the faith. This entire scene, however, with its gold trimming and the attitude of the attendant, is turned ironically to suggest greed, corruption, cynicism—the very opposite of the word used, charity. Yet the episode, which is Phoenix's final and most severe trial, also results in her final emergence as a redeemer and might be called her Calvary.

Perhaps a better way to get at the meaning of Christmas and the meaning of "A Worn Path" is to talk about life and death. In a sense, the meaning of Christmas and that of Easter are the same—a celebration of life out of death. (Notice that Phoenix refers to herself as a *June* bug and that the woman with the packages "gave off perfume like the *red roses in hot summer*.") [Italics mine.] Christ is born in the death of the year and in a near-dead nature-society situation in order to rejuvenate life itself, naturally and spiritually. He dies in order that the life of others may be saved. He is reborn out of death, and so are nature, love, and the spirit of man. All this is the potent Christian explanation of the central irony of human existence, that life means death and death is life. One might state the meaning of "A Worn Path" in similar terms, where Phoenix endures a long, agonizing dying in order to redeem her grandson's life. So the medicine, which the nurse calls charity as she makes a check in her book, is a symbol of love and life. The windmill represents the same duality, but lighter sides of both aspects. If the path is the path of life, then its end is death and the purpose of that death is new life.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the story is merely a paralleling of the Christian nature-myth. It is, rather, a miniature nature-myth of its own which uses elements of many traditions. The most obvious example is the name Phoenix from the mythological Egyptian bird, symbol of immortality and resurrection, which dies so that a new Phoenix may emerge from its ashes. There is a reference to the Daedalus labyrinth myth when Phoenix walks through the corn field and Miss Welty puns: "'Though the maze now,' she said, for there was no path." That ambivalent figure of the hunter comes into play here as both a death figure (killer, bag full of slain quail) and a life figure (unconscious giver of life with the nickel, banisher of Cerberus-like black dog who is attacking Phoenix), but in any case a folk-legend figure who can fill "the whole landscape" with his laugh. And there are several references to the course of the sun across the sky which gives a new dimension to the life-road equation; e.g., "Sun so high!,,. The time getting all gone here."

The most impressive extra-Christian elements are the patterns that identify Phoenix as a creature of nature herself and as a ritual-magic figure. Thus, Phoenix makes a sound



"like the chirping of a solitary little bird," her hair has "an odor like copper," and at one point "with [her] mouth drawn down, [she] shook her head once or twice in a little strutting way." Even more remarkable is the "fixed and ceremonial stiffness" of her body, which moves "like a festival figure in some parade." The cane she carries, made from an umbrella, is tapped on the ground like a magic wand, and she uses it to "switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things." At the same time she utters little spells:

Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons, and wild animals!...
Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites...

Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don't let none of those come running my direction...

Ghost, ... who be you the ghost of? ...

Sweetgum makes the water sweet...

Nobody know who made this well for it
was here when I was born...

Sleep on, alligators, and blow your bubbles.

Other suggestions of magic appear in the whirling of cornhusks in streamers about her skirts, when she parts "her way from side to side with the cane, through the whispering field," when the quail seem "unseen," and when the cabins are "all like old women under a spell sitting there." Finally, ironically, when Phoenix swings at the black dog, she goes over "in the ditch, like a little puff of mile-weed."

More or less remote, more or less direct, all these allusions are used for the same effect as are the references to Christianity, to reinforce a statement of the meaning of life. This brings us back to the basic life-road equation of the story, and there are numerous indications that the path is life and that the end of the road is death and renewal of life. These suggestions are of three types; statements which relate the road, the trip, or Phoenix to time: Phoenix walks "with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock"; she tells the hunter, "I bound to go.... The time come around"; and the nurse says "She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork." Second (the most frequent type), there are descriptions of the road or episodes along the way which are suggestive of life, usually in a simple metaphorical way: "I got a long way" (ambiguously referring to past and future); "I in the thorny bush"; "up through pines-----Now down through oaks"; "This the easy place. This the easy going." Third, there are direct references to death, age, and life; Phoenix says to a buzzard, "Who you watching?" and to a scarecrow, "Who be you the ghost of? For I have heard of nary death close by"; then she performs a little dance of death with the scarecrow after she says, "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know,"

This brings us full circle in an examination of the design of the story, and it should be possible now to say something about the total meaning of "A Worn Path." The path is the path of life, and the story is an attempt to probe the meaning of life in its simplest, most elementary terms. Through the story we arrive at a definition of life, albeit a teleological one. When the hunter tells Phoenix to "take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you," the irony is obvious and so is the metaphor: don't live and you can't die. When Phoenix forgets why she has made the arduous trek to Natchez, we



understand that it is only a rare person who knows the meaning of his life, that living does not imply knowing. When Phoenix describes the Christ-like child waiting for her and says, "I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation," we understand several things about it: her life is almost over, she sees clearly the meaning of life, she has an abiding faith in that meaning, and she will share with her grandson this great revelation just as together they embody its significance. And when Phoenix's "slow step began on the stairs, going down," as she starts back to bring the boy the medicine and the windmill, we see a composite symbol of life itself, dying so that life may continue. Life is a journey toward death, because one must die in order that life may go on.

Source: Neil D. Isaacs, "Life for Phoenix," in *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction*, edited by Laura Champion, Greenwood Press, 1994, pp. 37-42.



Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Welty talks about her inspiration to write "A Worn Path" and answers those who have asked her if Phoenix's grandson is really dead at the time of her trek in to town.

A story writer is more than happy to be read by students; the fact that these serious readers think and feel something in response to his work he finds life-giving. At the same time, he may not always be able to reply to their specific questions in kind. I wondered if it might clarify something, for both the questioners and myself, if I set down a general reply to the question that comes to me most often in the mail, from both students and their teachers, after some classroom discussion. The unrivaled favorite is this: "Is Phoenix Jackson's grandson really dead?"

It refers to a short story I wrote years ago called "A Worn Path," which tells of a day's journey an old woman makes on foot from deep in the country into town and into a doctor's office on behalf of her little grandson; he is at home, periodically ill, and periodically she comes for his medicine; they give it to her as usual, she receives it and starts the journey back.

I had not meant to mystify readers by withholding any fact; it is not a writer's business to tease. The story is told through Phoenix's mind as she undertakes her errand. As the author at one with the character as I tell it, I must assume that the boy is alive. As the reader, you are free to think as you like, of course: the story invites you to believe that no matter what happens, Phoenix, for as long as she is able to walk and can hold to her purpose, will make her journey. The *possibility* that she would keep on even if he were dead is there in her devotion and its single-minded, single-track errand. Certainly the *artistic* truth, which should be good enough for the fact, lies in Phoenix's own answer to that question. When the nurse asks, "He isn't dead, is he?" she speaks for herself: "He still the same. He going to last."

The grandchild is the incentive. But it is the journey, the going of the errand, that is the story, and the question is not whether the grandchild is in reality alive or dead. It doesn't affect the outcome of the story or its meaning from start to finish. But it is not the question itself that has struck me as much as the idea, almost without exception implied in the asking, that for Phoenix's grandson to be dead would somehow make the story "better."

It's *all right*, I want to say to the students who write to me, for things to be what they appear to be, for words to mean what they say. It's all right too for words and appearances to mean more than one thing—ambiguity is a fact of life. But it is *not* all right, not in good faith, for things not to mean what they say. A fiction writer's responsibility covers not only what he presents as the facts of a given story but what he chooses to stir up as their implications. In the end, these implications too become facts, in the larger, fictional sense.



The grandson's plight was real and it made the truth of the story, which is the story of an errand of love carried out. If the child no longer lived, the truth would persist in the "wornness" of the path. But his being dead can't increase the truth of the story, can't affect it one way or the other. I think I signal this, because the end of the story has been reached before old Phoenix gets home again: she simply starts back. To the question "Is the grandson really dead?" I could reply that it doesn't make any difference. I could also say that I did not make him up in order to let him play a trick on Phoenix. But my best answer would be: "*Phoenix is alive.*"

The origin of a story is sometimes a trustworthy clue to the author—or can provide him with the clue—to its key image; maybe in this case it will do the same for the reader. One day I saw a solitary old woman like Phoenix. She was walking; I saw her, at middle distance, in a winter country landscape, and watched her slowly make her way across my line of vision. That sight of her made me write the story. I invented an errand for her, but that only seemed a living part of the figure she was herself: what errand other than for someone else could be making her go? And her going was the first thing, her persisting in her landscape was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep. I brought her up close enough, by imagination, to describe her face, make her present to the eyes, but the full-length figure moving across the winter fields was the indelible one and the image to keep, and the perspective extending into the vanishing distance the true one to hold in mind.

I invented for my character, as I wrote, some passing adventures—some dreams and harassments and a small triumph or two, some jolts to her pride, some flights of fancy to console her, one or two encounters to scare her, a moment that gave her cause to feel ashamed, a moment to dance and preen—for it had to be a *journey*, and all these things belonged to that, parts of life's uncertainty.

A narrative line is in its deeper sense, of course, the tracing out of a meaning, and the real continuity of a story lies in this probing forward. The real dramatic force of a story depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going. The emotional value is the measure of the reach of the story. What gives any such content to "A Worn Path" is not its circumstances but its *subject*: the deep-grained habit of love.

What I hoped would come clear was that in the whole surround of this story, the world it threads through, the only certain thing at all is the worn path. The habit of love cuts through confusion and stumbles or contrives its way out of difficulty, it remembers the way even when it forgets, for a dumbfounded moment, its reason for being. The path is the thing that matters.

Her victory—old Phoenix's—is when she sees the diploma in the doctor's office, when she finds "nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head." The return with the medicine is just a matter of retracing her own footsteps. It is the part of the journey, and of the story, that can now go without saying.



In the matter of function, old Phoenix's way might even do as a sort of parallel to your way of work if you are a writer of stories. The way to get there is the all-important, all-absorbing problem, and this problem is your reason for undertaking the story. Your only guide, too, is your sureness about your subject, about what this subject is. Like Phoenix, you work all your life to find your way, through all the obstructions and the false appearances and the upsets you may have brought on yourself, to reach a meaning—using inventions of your imagination, perhaps helped out by your dreams and bits of good luck. And finally, too, like Phoenix, you have to assume that what you are working in aid of is life, not death.

But you would make the trip anyway, wouldn't you?—just on hope.

Source; Eudora Welty, "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 1, No. 1, September, 1974, pp. 219-21.



Critical Essay #4

In the following short essay, Donlan argues that Phoenix Jackson, far from being a stereotyped African-American character, is actually a symbol of immortality.

On the surface Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" is an account of an old black woman's journey from Old Natchez Trace to Natchez. In fact, some readers may perceive Old Phoenix as a negative black stereotype. However, a second level of interpretation indicates a powerful statement of man's immortality. This paper will be concerned with three elements that substantiate the theme of immortality: references to death, references to time, and references to the Phoenix myth from Egyptian mythology. In this way, Old Phoenix is not a stereotype but a symbol of immortality.

Old Phoenix' journey has significance. The title of the story—"A Worn Path"—suggests the journey to be ritualistic, an idea supported by the phrase "festival figure" used to describe Old Phoenix. During her journey Old Phoenix is surrounded by death. The season is winter. The earth is frozen. The woods are still, and the dove mourns. She encounters "big dead trees," a hunter carrying dead birds, dead weeds. She even dances with a scarecrow. Though she is "in death," Old Phoenix does not die. In fact, she survives splendidly. She appears indestructible, even immortal.

Her immortality is suggested by Welty's references to time. A time image is used to describe Old Phoenix' walk: "the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock." Her appearance is "blue with age." When the hunter encounters Old Phoenix, he says "You must be a hundred years old." Even Phoenix says of herself, "I the oldest people I ever saw."

The idea that Old Phoenix is immortal is given additional support by frequent reference to the Phoenix myth in Egyptian mythology. The Phoenix—also known by the terms *bennu* and *Roc*—is a large bird that retains immortality by restoring itself every five hundred years (scholars differ as to the precise period of time) by setting fire to its nest and immolating itself by fanning the fire with its wings. From the ashes a new Phoenix arises. It collects the ashes into an egg and flies to Heliopolis, a religious city in Egypt, and deposits the egg at the Temple of the Sun. Some scholars have linked the death and rebirth of the Phoenix with the rising and setting of the sun.

Although "A Worn Path" is not an exact retelling of the Phoenix myth, certain parallels merit discussion. First, Old Phoenix resembles the mythical bird in personal appearance. The bennu is known for its brilliant scarlet and gold plumage. Welty describes Old Phoenix in this way: "A golden color ran underneath and the two knobs of her cheeks were illuminated by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the *red rag*, her hair came down on her neck___" "When Old Phoenix walks, she resembles a giant bird: "She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks.... Every time she took a step she might have fallen over her unlaced shoes." Even the bennu's ceremonial song finds its parallel: "A grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a little bird."



Second, parallels exist in the two journeys. Both are made ritually. The nurse at the hospital comments that Old Phoenix "makes these trips as regular as clockwork." The destinations in both cases are large cities: Heliopolis and Natchez. En-route to the city, both travellers stop ceremonially to restore themselves. The Phoenix burns itself on the nest, only to rise from the ashes, fresh and young. When Old Phoenix sits down to rest, she gives the appearance of nesting: "She spread her skirts on the bank around her and folded her hands over her knees." Then Welty describes the rejuvenated Phoenix: "There she had to creep and crawl, spreading her knees and stretching her fingers like a baby trying to climb the steps." Further youth images substantiate her rejuvenation: Old Phoenix' request that a lady lace up her shoe, the flame of comprehension at the doctor's office, and the paper windmill. The frequent references to birds also help in constructing the mythological basis for the story.

Two further mythological references are worth considering. The shiny nickel which Old Phoenix retrieves "With the grace and care ... in lifting an egg from under a setting hen" has its parallel in the egg of myrrh taken by the Phoenix to the Temple of the Sun. Second, the two visitations—the imagined encounter with the small boy and the real encounter with the hunter—parallel the manifestations of the sun god Ra, who would assume human form— young in the morning, old in the evening, to correlate with the rising and setting of the sun. This parallel is supported by the many references to sun and light throughout the story.

"A Worn Path," read as a simple narrative, communicates a human experience, both logically and memorably. However, the symbolic level of interpretation, revealing the theme of immortality, gives the story texture and power.

Source: Dan Donlan, "A Worn Path': Immortality of Stereotype," in *English Journal*, Vol 62, No. 4, April, 1973, pp. 549-50.

Adaptations

"A Worn Path" was adapted into a 20-minute film produced by Worn Path Productions and distributed by Pyramid Film and Video. The film includes a ten-minute interview with Eudora Welty, conducted by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Beth Henley.

"Eudora Welty Reads 'Why I Live at the P.O.' and 'A Worn Path'" was produced by Caedmon Audio Cassettes in 1992.



Topics for Further Study

Research the history of the Natchez Trace in Mississippi and the surrounding area. How has the trail been important to various groups throughout history, and why is this an appropriate setting for Welty's story of Phoenix Jackson?

Find out about race relations in the United States, especially in Mississippi, during the early 1940s. Are these the same attitudes Welty depicts in "A Worn Path"?

The journey has been a literary device since ancient Greek times when Homer wrote *The Odyssey*. How is Phoenix Jackson's walk through the woods similar to Odysseus's seven-year journey home after the Trojan War?

Compare and Contrast

1941: *Native Son*, a stage adaptation of James Baldwin's novel, opens at the St. James Theater in New York City.

1997: Tiger Woods becomes the youngest person to win golfs Master's Tournament, as well as the first person of color to do so.

1941: African-American doctor Charles Richard Drew opens the first blood bank in New York. Segregation laws prevent him from donating his own blood.

1997: The White House issues an official policy to the survivors and families of the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment which began in the 1940s. Hundreds of infected black men were denied treatment in order to study the effects of the disease over time.

1941: *Negro Digest* begins publishing in Chicago with an initial circulation of 3,000.

1997: African-American filmmaker Spike Lee forms an advertising company to make television commercials geared towards black and urban consumers.

What Do I Read Next?

"Why I Live at the P.O.," a critically acclaimed story by Welty, in which a young woman's difficult relationship with her parents is exposed with humor.

Carson McCullers also writes of the Southern experience although from a different point of view. Her novels *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* were written in the same era as Welty's first stories.

"A Rose for Emily," a short story by fellow Southerner William Faulkner is also about an older single woman.

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* examines the aftermath of slavery in rural Ohio in the late nineteenth-century.

The Optimist's Daughter, Welty's semi-autobiographical novel about the strained ties between a parent and child won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972.



Further Study

Butterworth, Nancy K. "From Civil War to Civil Rights: Race Relations in 'A Worn Path,'" in *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*, edited by Dawn Trouard, Kent State University Press, 1989.

Butterworth discusses the racial politics of the story.

Conversations with Eudora Welty, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984. Collected here are many interviews and personal conversations various people have had with Eudora Volume 3 2 7

Worn Path Welty. A valuable resource for those interested in the author herself, her work, her life, and her concerns.

Eudora Welty, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

This collection of thirteen essays about Eudora Welty's fiction provides an excellent introduction to her work. These essays are written by some very well-known critics and writers, such as Katherine Anne Porter, Joyce Carol Oates, and Robert Penn Warren.

Schmidt, Peter *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction*, University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

An analysis of Welty's short stories in the contexts of Southern writing and women's writing.

Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginnings*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

This autobiography of sorts is a more recent publication by Welty. The sections "Listening," "Learning to See," and "Finding a Voice" may provide inspiration to those who wish to become writers.

Westling, Louise. *Eudora Welty*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1989.

This book comes from the "Women Writers" series, and, therefore, it has a somewhat gender-based approach. The chapters deal with ways that women appear in the work of Welty, a writer who is sometimes uncomfortable with the ideas of feminism.



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British Critics, 1920-1951, edited by John W Aldridge, The Ronald Press Company, 1952, pp 506-17.

Warren, Robert Penn. "The Love and the Separateness of Miss Welty," in *Kenyon Review*, Volume 6, 1944, pp 246-259.

Welty, Eudora *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, Vintage Books/Random House, 1979.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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