

ANALYSIS

“A Worn Path” (1941)



Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“One day I saw a solitary old woman like Phoenix. She was walking; I saw her in the 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?... The real dramatic force of the story depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going.... What gives any such content to ‘A Worn Path’ is not its circumstances but its subject: the deep-grained habit of love.”

Eudora Welty
The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews
(Random House 1979) 161

“Let me admit a deeply personal preference for this particular kind of story, where external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end. This is not easy to accomplish, but it is always worth trying, and Miss Welty is so successful at it, it would seem her most familiar territory. There is no blurring at the edges, but evidence of an active and disciplined imagination working firmly in a strong line of continuity, the waking faculty of daylight reason recollecting and recording the crazy logic of the dream.”

Katherine Anne Porter
Introduction
A Curtain of Green by Eudora Welty
(Doubleday 1941)

“A story like ‘A Worn Path’ is unimaginable in any hands but hers or Chekhov’s (and it is only illustrative of my point that this uncomplicated tale of duty has evoked a blizzard of nutty mytho-symbolist explications).”

Reynolds Price
The New Republic (1980)

“‘A Worn Path’ is perhaps Eudora Welty’s classic story. Without raising her voice or any social banner—and without abandoning her rich sense of humor (which here in no way demeans her serious

subject)—she presents in the lonely walk of Old Phoenix along the Natchez Trace to get free medicine for her sick grandson something of the quintessence of all suffering and all oppression. ‘Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons, and wild animals!... Keep out from under these feet, little bobwhites.... Keep the big wild hogs out of my path.... I got a long way.’ She is almost at one with the animals; defenseless, she endures—yet there is no suggestion of sentimentality here, just as there is none of bitterness. Of all the stories heard by black children in a Jackson Freedom School in 1964, this was their favorite. Here, in this exploited ex-slave, rendered by Welty with such tenderness and love, was their own dear mother, here with no political issues raised, was the call for justice they best understood.”

Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer, Robert Hoopes
The Short Story: An Introduction
(McGraw-Hill 1983) 410

“One aspect of the story that has not been adequately explored is the portrayal of Phoenix Jackson as an almost allegorical representation of black people’s traits and behaviors from slave times to the story’s present. Alfred Appel, Jr. has suggested such a reading when he describes the story as ‘an effort at telescoping the history of the Negro woman’ (*Season*, 166). But he doesn’t develop it.... If we assume that Phoenix was eighteen or more at Emancipation and posit the present action of the story to be around 1940, when it was written, she would be approximately 100 years old.... This extreme age serves a symbolic function of allowing her personally to have spanned the entire history of the black people from antebellum days to those just prior to the civil rights movement.... Wonderful pathos is evoked by the formally unschooled Phoenix wishing education for herself, her grandson, and, by implication, her people.... All of the hunter’s actions can be explained in terms of accepted social behavior of the rural South in the 1930s and 1940s.”

Nancy K. Butterworth
Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller
ed. Dawn Trouard
(Kent State 1989)

The phoenix in Greek mythology is a bird that is reborn in cycles, forever rising from the ashes of its predecessor. It is associated with time, the sun, resurrection, spiritual rebirth, and Christ. Jackson is a name common among black people that evokes Andrew Jackson, the President most identified with common people, recalling Jackson’s Island in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The old black woman Phoenix Jackson uses a cane she taps on the earth with a sound “like the chirping of a solitary little bird.” She lives “far out in the country.” The tone is pastoral, appealing to the heart, eliciting sympathy for her because she is “very old and small,” alone, poor, female, and black: “I the oldest people I ever know.”

This story is an example of Modernist holistic realism—like Faulkner. Further, “A Worn Path” exhibits characteristics of literature in the transcendental mode of consciousness, including: the journey into the Wilderness, Christ-evoking figure as exemplar, wise old spiritual guide, solitude, self-reliance, confrontation with ultimate Truth manifest in animals, spiritual death (in the ditch) and rebirth, atonement with Nature, reconciliation of opposites integrating head and heart (Civilization and Nature), cyclical journey, inner light (dream), transcendence of time and space (losing her memory temporarily), holistic perception, and harmonious vision of life both unique and universal.

With her head tied in a red rag, Phoenix is a social type of the poor black woman rendered in the tradition of Realism. More than that, she moves ahead “with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock.” She embodies the values of psychological balance, tradition, reliability, love, loyalty and renewal. Many have gone this way before her, the journey is archetypal. All races, all times and places. Trials vary in kind from one life to another. Allegorically, in the most general sense Phoenix is the spirit of the human race moving through time on a “worn path.” The journey of the mythic hero is elaborated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) by Joseph Campbell. Traditionally the hero goes from the City into the Wilderness, undergoes trials and brings back some truth or other boon to society. Phoenix goes instead from the Wilderness to the City and brings back to her grandson the medicine and the toy windmill. Her story as told by Welty is her boon to society.

Phoenix is also a unique individual, with skin that had a “pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles.” This “pattern” is a metaphor of her distinctive individual character traits and their integrity. Later in the story, when she sees the nickel fall out of the hunter’s pocket and is tempted to take it, “the deep lines of her face went into a fierce and different radiation.” Then she bends and “the nickel was in her pocket. A bird flew by.” The nickel gives her a fleeting economic freedom from dependency if she can get away with it. Yet she feels she has sinned: “God watching me the whole time. I comes to stealing.” Her long apron of bleached sugar sacks connotes cleanliness and sweetness, “all neat and tidy.” At the same time she is identified with Nature “as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead.” Phoenix is a precursor of Pilate in *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison.

This little old woman is bold and brave--heroic as she fends away wild animals with her cane: “Keep the big wild hogs out of my path.” This appeal to a protective higher power is another characteristic of human kind as a whole. Such universality is a characteristic of the best Realism, while the archetypal allegory of the hazardous journey exemplifies the “mythic method” characteristic of Modernism. Her feeling “like there is chains about my feet” adds depth to her experience by evoking slavery as a psychological influence on her development. This makes her a representative of her race in America, enduring and prevailing like Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by Faulkner.

She snags her dress on a thorny bush, but pulls free. Her journey full of symbolic difficulties recalls the classic Christian allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) by John Bunyan, as well as Greek myths. “‘Now comes the trial,’ said Phoenix.” This comparison of the weak little old woman to Hercules and his trials is ironic, yet the parallel affirms her heroism. She makes a difficult crossing on a log over a creek—no piece of cake. Then she hallucinates a little boy who brings her a piece of cake. Her trials are far from over. She must crawl through a barbed-wire fence “like a baby trying to climb the steps.” The likeness to a baby connotes the rebirth of the phoenix. She rises to her feet and recalls seeing a two-headed snake, like another creature out of mythology. Wending her way through a “maze” of maize—dead corn—Phoenix renews the Greek myth of the minotaur: “‘Glad this not the season for bulls,’ she said.”

There is a big black dog, however, an archetypal monster that knocks her into a ditch—where she might have died. A friendly white hunter finds her and lifts her up. He represents civilization in that his dog is on a chain, under control. He tries to control Phoenix too, urging her to turn around and go home. He thinks she will never make it to town, but she is determined: “‘I bound to go to town, mister,’ said Phoenix. ‘The time come around.’” Her journey is cyclical like Nature. The white hunter and his dog chase away the big black dog, imposing civilized order and saving Phoenix, though also going on to kill other birds. Unaware that she has picked up the nickel that fell out of his pocket, the hunter says “‘I’d give you a dime if I had any money with me.’” He is Civilization killing birds and he points his gun at Phoenix, intimidating without menacing. His dishonesty and limited charity make him a representative white liberal who gives her a lift up but does not think she is capable of progress—making it to town on her own. He is hunting kills while Phoenix is risking her life on a mission of charity. They are going in opposite directions.

Phoenix finally makes it to the City. “Bells were ringing,” it is Christmas and the city of Natchez is “shining,” a symbol of all that civilization has to offer. She is not bedazzled by the bright lights. She “would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her.” Her near blindness to the material world has made her more deeply self-reliant and increased her spirituality. Blindness or near blindness is a literal characteristic of visionary seers in literature including Homer, Milton, Yeats, and Joyce. In *Wise Blood* (1952) by Welty’s fellow southerner Flannery O’Connor, the protagonist attains salvation only by blinding himself.

With a “dream” in her heart, the old woman climbs a tower of stairs to a government office. The lady outside was nice enough to tie her shoes for her, but the government employee is presumptuous and condescending: “A charity case, I suppose.” The nurse who knows her comes in and explains that Phoenix “doesn’t come for herself—she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork.” This comparison recalls the one in the first paragraph of the story, to a “pendulum in a grandfather clock.” She was arrested in her progress by the Civil War, as well as by her race and age: “I never did go to school. I was too old at the Surrender.”

Old Phoenix never surrenders. She tells the two government employees with health care insurance how her young grandson swallowed lye, apparently attempting suicide in despair, a contrast to her own refusal to give up, making the hazardous long journey on his behalf whenever he needs medicine to breathe. “He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird.” He too is a phoenix, her little bird, representing the younger generation of impoverished blacks. The nurse records the medicine she gives Phoenix as “Charity.” The irony is that Phoenix has worked so hard and traveled so far and risked her life on a mission of charity, only to be insulted by the bureaucracy as a charity case--for accepting one little bottle of medicine. It is the government employees who are the greatest beneficiaries from taxpayers.

Phoenix herself is so charitable that she will take both the nickel “stolen” from the hunter and the charity nickel from the government clerk and buy a toy windmill for her grandson. This charity redeems her from these two evils—theft and dependency--earlier symbolized by the two-headed snake. The two heads of the snake also refer to the evils inherent in both Nature and Civilization. The government employees are literally higher up in their city building, but the poor old woman from the country is higher up spiritually. Willa Cather had used this kind of ironic symbolism at the end of *The Professor's House* in 1925. The story ends with the ironic image of the risen Phoenix going down the stairs of the government building, whereas in fact she goes on ascending spiritually, as imaged in her lifting up the windmill of Civilization that will bring joy to the boy, lifting his eyes and heart in response to Nature.

Michael Hollister (2013)