

A Journey of Love :

The Origin and Development of "A Worn Path" as a Short Story

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Eudora Welty's early short story "A Worn Path" is a tale of an act of love and self-sacrifice narrated as a journey. Its subject, as the author has said, is love; the journey, we may add, is the means the author used to show a particular act of love.

In the use of a journey to tell its story and to deliver its message "A Worn Path" belongs to an ancient and honored tradition in Western literature. Phoenix Jackson's journey on foot, filled with incident and danger for her, reminds us of the time-honored tradition of the journey used to high purposes in such works of Western literature as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1321), and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678 and 1684).

The form of "A Worn Path"—that of a short story—places it in a much more recent and modern tradition. Its origin as a short story (as described by the author), as we shall see below, provides an excellent insight into its workings and makes it a good example of the short story genre.

"A Worn Path", of course, is in all ways a modern work. Old Phoenix's journey, for instance, has many humorous moments: humorous for old Phoenix herself, perhaps, but surely for the reader. The narration, particularly of the journey, is rather jaunty; the narrative sheds some of its lightness of mood after old Phoenix arrives at the doctor's office, but the atmosphere of the story essentially remains the same throughout. The function of Phoenix's journey is modern in the sense that it does not serve as a convenient vehicle for a didactic or moralistic end or purpose. The journey forms the bulk of the story but not the whole of it; it is part and parcel of the content of "A Worn Path." We shall see the confirmation of this in Miss Welty's account of how the story originated with her.

"A Worn Path" was published in 1941. More recently Miss Welty has often spoken of the story in interviews and has written a short essay, "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" (1974), about it. In her essay she goes on to elaborate on how the story developed itself around the fact that old Phoenix was going on a *journey*:

I invented for my character [Phoenix], 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, a moment that gave her cause to be 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. (Welty 161)

There seems to be a hint of allegory, perhaps, in the author's remarks about Phoenix's journey, but, unlike in the allegory, the attention is focused on the individual character and values of the heroine Phoenix herself. The origin of a story, Miss Welty writes in her essay and with reference specifically to "A Worn Path," is a "trustworthy clue to its key image" (Welty 161). The "key image" is the solitary figure of old Phoenix steadfast on her journey and in her errand undertaken for the sake of another person. "I invented an errand for her," the author writes, "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? (Welty 161). Thus the story tells of a journey. This "key image" of old Phoenix on her self-sacrificing journey is a clue, we may say in paraphrase of Miss Welty's remark, to the development of "A Worn Path" as a short story rather than as a work of some other genre.

It may be said of a short story in general that it accomplishes its purpose upon the revelation of character and the presentation of its theme: that when these have been accomplished the story is complete. "A Worn Path" illustrates this nicely. The story does not give us an account, for instance, of old Phoenix's return journey. No account is necessary. We know intuitively that the journey will be successfully completed. We know that the important thing is Phoenix's going and persisting.

It is helpful in understanding the nature of the short story to contrast this genre with the novel. Miss Welty offers a few thoughts on this contrast in an interview with Charles T. Bunting (1972). She says:

Well, a short story to me, and I think to most writers, is a different kind of entity from a novel. Each form has its own organization. But a short story is more a single thing, more one sustained effort, which has a beginning, a rise, and a fall. And, of course, a novel has so much wider scope, greater looseness of texture, and so much more room to expand. Many rises and falls are possible, and even necessary. [. . .] In the case of a short story, you can't ever let the tautness of line relax. It has to be strung very tight upon its single thread usually, and everything is subordinated to the theme of the story: characters and mood and place and time; and none of those things are as important as the development itself. Whereas in a novel you have time to shade a character, allow him his growth, in a short story a character hardly changes from beginning to end. (Bunting 45)

These remarks point to an excellent definition of the short story genre. They apply very well to "A Worn Path," in which we see a clear line of development of its subject, encompassing a steady revelation of Phoenix's character and an unequivocal presentation of the theme.

What, then, is the subject of this story? What is the theme? "The real dramatic force of a

story," Miss Welty writes in "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?", "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" (161). If the subject of this story is love, then Phoenix's journey, which for her as a very old and frail person is an act of self-risk and sacrifice, and her character itself lead to the word "charity": is not this the theme of the story? Charity, to the Christian mentality, is perhaps the most positive of acts. In this connection one is reminded of a remark Miss Welty made in an interview with Linda Kuehl (in 1972) in speaking, in a general context, of her stories and novels. "My natural temperament," she told her interviewer, "is one of positive feelings, and I really do work for resolution in a story" (Kuehl 86). Judged according to this criterion "A Worn Path" must be viewed as a successful short story. In qualifying or clarifying her remark above Miss Welty added the following comment. It seems to express her mentality as a story writer very succinctly in connection with our discussion of "A Worn Path":

I don't think we often see life resolving itself, not in any sort of perfect way, but I like the fiction writer's feeling of being able to confront an experience and resolve it as art, however imperfectly and briefly--to hold it and express it in a story's terms. (Kuehl 86)

The sympathetic and moving portrait of Old Phoenix and the inspiring depiction of her act of love is a monument to Miss Welty's narrative skill and artistic vision. Old Phoenix's humanity transcends any regional boundary. At the same time in its origin and development "A Worn Path" is intimately tied to its southern regional background and the circumstances of the Negroes of Mississippi during the Depression as well as before and after it. It is the product not only of a writer of integrity but of a certain time and place. In this paper I also want to examine these factors of the story's origin and development with special reference to the importance of place and the question of Eudora Welty's regional background.

Eudora Welty is a southerner by birth and by choice. She was born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1927, at her father's urging, she left Mississippi State College for Women--she had been a student there for two years--to finish college at a midwestern university (she got an A.B. degree from Wisconsin in 1929). She then studied business (advertising) at Columbia in New York City. She worked as a book reviewer in New York City for a few months, but returned to Jackson in 1931, when her father died, to help her mother; there she worked for a local radio station and as a society column correspondent for a Memphis, Tennessee newspaper. In 1933 she took a job with the W.P.A. in Mississippi and worked as a publicity agent, traveling around the state, until 1936.¹ Her early interests were painting and photography, and in 1936 a one-man show of her unposed photographic studies of Negroes in Mississippi, made while she was traveling around the state as a W.P.A. publicity agent, was held in a gallery in New York City. The photographs had been taken in a private capacity, not as a part of her work, and reflected her interest in people. It was in that same year that her career as a writer formally began, with the publication of her short story "Death of a Traveling

Salesman" in a little magazine called *Manuscript*. This event was followed by the publication of several more stories in larger magazines, including the publication of "A Worn Path" in 1941. In that same year a collection of these early stories was published in book form as *A Curtain of Green*.

Miss Welty said (in 1977) that her experiences of meeting people all over her native state in her W.P.A. job caused her to "seriously attempt" becoming "a real writer, a true writer" (Freeman 178). She added to her interviewer, Jean Todd Freeman, that her W.P.A. traveling experience "made me see, for the first time, what life was really like in this state [Mississippi]" (Freeman 178).

Though Miss Welty recognizes herself as a southerner, she says that her subject in her stories and novels is not the South or southerners but people. In her interview with Linda Kuehl in 1972 she did not object, however, to the critics calling her a regional writer:

I don't mind being called a regional writer. It's the critic's job to place and judge. But the critic can't really have a say in what a writer chooses to write about--that's the writer's lone responsibility. I just think of myself as writing about human beings and I happen to live in a region, as do we all, so I write about what I know--it's the same case for any writer living anywhere. I happen to love my particular region. If this shows, I don't mind. (Kuehl 87)

To this she added that place is not only her source of inspiration, but her "source of knowledge," and that "it tells me the important things"--that is, what is important (Kuehl 87).

"A Worn Path" perfectly illustrates her assertions in that interview. Her recounting of how the story originated reveals that her imagination seized upon "the important things" in the character of Old Phoenix--the old woman's spirit of charity and her "deep-grained habit of love" (Welty 161). In yet another interview (with Bill Ferris in 1975 and 1976) Welty, talking about the origin of the story, tells how her imagination created the core of the story out of two small experiences she had. Sitting under a tree out in the country one day she saw a "small, distant figure come out of the woods" and move across her field of vision on "a purposeful, measured journey"--an "errand" that one wouldn't go on "so purposefully, unless it were for someone else [. . . that is, for] a child" (Ferris 167-168). Miss Welty goes on to say that another time, on the same road, an old woman came along--perhaps the same one as the first figure--and while stopping to talk used the words, "I was too old at the Surrender" (Ferris 168)². These two images--of the solitary black woman bent on some errand of apparent charity, and of a black woman of great age and, no doubt, poverty, disadvantaged by her slave origins--combined in the author's mind to create the story.³

It is almost unimaginable that "A Worn Path," built around the image of the old black woman on her foot-journey of great importance, could have had its origin outside the South. There is something inherently southern in old Phoenix's character and circumstances. Miss Welty's black heroine is akin to her fellow Mississippi writer William Faulkner's black heroes in her patient endurance, her strength of character and steadfastness of purpose, her moral and

intellectual superiority to the white man (as when she tricks the hunter and his dog into chasing the other dog so that she may retrieve the nickel that has fallen out of his pocket--he has lied that he has no money with him), her pride (as when she asks the white woman on the street in town to tie her shoe laces for her), her living link to the tragedy of the history of the South (she was too old to learn to read by the time of the Surrender). The "important things" that the author's mind singled out from the images it received are of universal human significance, but they were inspired in "A Worn Path" by facts associated with the life of the Negroes in the rural South.

Notes

1 The Works Projects Administration or W.P.A., as it was popularly called, is a former agency of the United States government. The W.P.A. was established in 1935 as the Works Progress Administration to help provide employment and cope with unemployment problems created by the economic depression which began in 1929. The vast majority of its activities was in the field of public works and construction. The name was changed in 1939. It was liquidated in 1943.

2 The "Surrender" refers to the surrender of the Confederate army (the army of the Confederate States of America, the southeastern states of the United States which comprise the South, under General Robert E. Lee) to the Union or United States army (under General Ulysses S. Grant) at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. This event signaled the defeat of the old South and the end of much of the old Southern way of life.

3 In this interview Miss Welty does not specify whether the woman was Negro. She says, in recounting this experience, that the woman was "like Phoenix" ("Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" 161); thus we may assume the woman was a black.

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