
A Worn Path: Motif Of Journey In A Story

All stories can be segmented into beginning middle and an end. A worn path by Eudora weity follows this pattern. In the beginning we meet phoenix as she makes her lonely journey encountering various obstacles in the natural world such as a steep hill, thorns which snag on her clothes, a log laid across a creek and a maze. The mood of the story changes somewhat with the introduction of the white hunter who helps her out of the ditch but who also points his gun in her face. We can identify the interactions with the hunter as indicating the middle of the story. Then at the end of the story, phoenix makes it to the city of Natchez and picks up her medicine from the clinic.

Segmenting the story in this way allows us to see the shape of the whole story at a glance. One of the aspects of the story we may perceive in this way is if that phoenix's journey seems to take place in three stages and in each stage of her journey different kinds of challenges. At first phoenix faces the challenges of negotiating her way through the natural world. Then the introduction of the hunter presents her with the challenge of negotiating a world of other people. Then in the city she finds herself facing the challenges of society. In this way we can observe the levels of obstacles that welty represents in the story and we see how the physical obstacles in the beginning of the story develop into the more complex kinds of obstacles such as racism, social stigma, and poverty described at the end of thr story. The structure in a worn path we never see phoenix at rest, we never see her at home, she is always constantly on the move. Her whole story can be seen as one extended middle without a beginning or an ending. She is forever traveling, forever suspended in the air. Reading the story in this way emphasizes the open-ended quality of the story. The end of the story is not the end for phoenix as she still has to make the whole journey again in reverse for the return trip.

This whole journey itself furthermore is only one of many such journeys that phoenix has made in the past and that she will continue to make in the future. When we consider this aspect of the story, we may think of it as a story about time itself. The manner in which we all live in the flux of an extended middle. Of course phoenix's name alludes to the mythical bird that lives through cycles of destruction and rebirth. The very first sentence sets the story in December, the end of one year and the beginning of the next. In the morning when time turns night it'll turn over in today. Phoenix herself is described as a grandfather clock because of the way she walks hobbling between one heavy step and one light step. In this context, phoenix herself seems to partake in the natural cycles of day and night. The phases of the moon and she seasons as if she herself is a force of nature bound to a relentless orbit. But for all her symbolic residents.

Phoenix also comes across as a human being. We had a said that a flat character is one that lacks complex motivations and phoenix might be considered as a flat character because all she seems to want throughout the story is to get the medicine for her grandson, but as we read the story more closely, her psychology appears to be more complex. "she received the nickel and then fished the other nickel out of her pocket and laid it besides the new one. She stared at her palm closely with her head on one side" one of the clues that phoenix is not a stereotypical grandmother figure. Its her crafty steps of a nickel from the hunter. when she sees the coin fall out of the hunters pocket she cleverly sets two dogs against each other to distract the hunter so that she can carefully scoop the nickel up into her own pocket without her being observed. We

know that stealing is wrong and we know that phoenix is supposed to be the protagonist so the reader has to invent a way of reconciling this apparent contradiction. Is it okay for phoenix to steal from the hunter because he is a bigot and deserves to get taken advantage of? Or does phoenix's extreme poverty provide an excuse for her behavior? Or are we to think of phoenix as combining as both noble and ignoble qualities? This would be another way of saying that we are supposed to think of her as human, as a round character. Indeed at the very end of the story she takes this nickel out again and holds it against another nickel that she received from the attendant at the clinic. The two nickels, the one that she stolen, and the one she received by comparatively honest means seems to represent two sides of her character recalling the description of phoenix in the first paragraph as balance between heaviness and lightness.

Another conflict that helps to make phoenix a round character is that while she persists in her commitment to obtaining the medicine for her grandson. At several points in the story she seems tempted to give up the story journey altogether and just sink down into restful death. At one point sitting down to rest she has a dream vision of a little boy who brings her a piece of cake which she is happy to accept. This spectral vision seems to represent a fantasy of giving in to the temptation to stop the journey. Even more noticeable when a black dog knocks her into a ditch she lies down in the springy weeds and unable to extract herself seems resigned to remaining in this shallow grave indefinitely. It is dumb luck that the hunter comes along and helps her out but the suggestion remains that phoenix is so old and so weary that the prospect of dying on her journey is not altogether unpleasant. Indeed, the frequency with which dream images intrude into phoenix's reality suggests that she exists in a kind of borderland between consciousness and sleep between life and death providing another frame of reference for that balance between heaviness and lightness said Welty she described in her initial description of her protagonist.

The setting of the story the American deep south at some point in the first half of the 20th century obviously plays an important role in the narrative. The disrespect shown toward phoenix by the hunter and by the attendance at the clinic is clearly intended to be understood within the context of jim crow era racial tension. While we can think of phoenix Jackson as a kind of eternal timeless pilgrim on a path between life and death. She is also a particular individual with a particular relationship to American history. We learned at the end of the story that phoenix never went to school because she was too old that "the surrender" meaning that when the south surrendered at the end of the civil war and the freed slaves were offered the opportunity to get an education. Phoenix was already beyond school-age. This revelation that phoenix spent the first two decades or so of her life as a slave has a chilling resonance to her statement in paragraph five "seems like there us chains about my feet, time I get this far" literally phoenix is having a hard time getting up the hill and the difficulty of moving forward recalls the weight of leg irons but the discovery that phoenix was born a slave makes this passage more than a figurative speech, it connects her struggles on this journey to the struggles she has undergone her whole life as a victim of slavery. The path takes on another meaning at the difficult path of phoenix's life.

The fact of the purpose of this journey is to obtain medicine for her grandson adds another dimension to the symbol of phoenix's path of life. The ultimate goal of the journey of life is to nurture the next generation. The grandson suffers from the effects having swallowed lye a corrosive alkaline substance that can produce serious chemical burns. The medicine phoenix obtains may help the grandson throat to heal. It may help him recover his voice. Of course finding one's voice is a potent metaphor for achieving a sense of empowerment and social

justice. When we consider the thrilling oratory of this generation of African-american civil rights activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who would come to prominence in the 1950's and 60's we may perhaps conclude that pheonix's journey was not in vain she she did in fact do her part to ensure that the next generation of African American's would have a voice.