

“A Worn Path”

The Story

After seeing an elderly African American woman striding across the landscape with a strong sense of purpose, Eudora Welty wrote a story exploring the possible motive for this intense journey. “A Worn Path” is that story. Students often asked Welty about the story, and their question was always the same: “Is Phoenix Jackson’s grandson really dead?” Welty took that question as the title for an essay interpreting the story, and she declared that she had always thought of the boy as still alive. Then she added, “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.” (See “Is Phoenix Jackson’s Grandson Really Dead?” in *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Random House, 1978), 159-62).

1. In the opening sentence of “A Worn Path,” the narrator describes Phoenix Jackson as “an old Negro woman.” Later the hunter calls her “Granny,” and the nurse refers to her as “Aunt Phoenix.” Was the term “Negro” an accepted term of respect in 1941? Are the references to Phoenix as “Granny” and “Aunt” disparaging in any way.
2. Phoenix Jackson lives in the Mississippi countryside near the old Natchez Trace. She knows the world of nature and feels at home in it. The town of Natchez, however, has Christmas lights turned on in the daytime, and the lady who ties Phoenix’s shoe wears perfume that smells like “the red roses in hot summer.” Does Welty contrast the natural wisdom of Phoenix with the artifice of the town?
3. Do the white characters in the story exemplify the racism of the time? Does their treatment of Phoenix suggest the need for changing racial attitudes? Consider Welty’s depictions of the hunter, the lady who ties Phoenix’s shoe, the attendant in the doctor’s office, and the nurse.
 - The hunter suggests that Phoenix is going to town for some “Santa Claus.” What is the real reason for her journey? Has the hunter underestimated her? Does he lie to her about not having any money? Why does he point his gun at her? How do you react to his doing so?
 - How does Phoenix decide whom she should ask to tie her shoe?
 - How do the attendant and the nurse treat Phoenix?
4. Why might Welty have chosen the name “Phoenix” for her character?
5. How old is Phoenix? What does she mean when she says she did not attend school because she was “too old at the Surrender”?
6. The grandson has swallowed lye, and such a plight was not uncommon. Students might be interested in Melissa Deakins Stang’s essay “The Real Plight: Lye Poisoning in ‘A Worn Path’” (*Eudora Welty Newsletter* 26.2 [Summer 2002]: 13-17).

7. Does Welty's reading of the story enhance your understanding of it? Do the comments she makes about the story do so as well?

Correspondence. Late in November of 1940, Eudora Welty wrote to her agent Diarmuid Russell, responding to his suggesting that she set a series of stories along an historic trail called the Natchez Trace. "A Worn Path" was one of the stories prompted by Russell's suggestion. Here you see a carbon copy of her letter. Students want to investigate the nature of this copying process. The next letter is an original. In December of 1940 Russell happily told Welty that this story, along with "Powerhouse," had been accepted by the Atlantic Monthly. It became the first Welty story to be printed in a major national magazine and helped Welty to win a book contract.

Photographs. Welty's photographs of depression-era Mississippi help us to envision the poverty that held individuals in its grasp, but these photos also show us the courage and resilience with which Mississippians faced that poverty. The weathered house in an eroded landscape might have been Phoenix Jackson's and the dignity of the two elderly women Welty photographs certainly was hers. The boy sitting on the porch steps and looking so unhappy suggests the desperate plight of Phoenix's grandson while the boy with a kite suggests the happiness Phoenix hopes the present of a pin-wheel will bring her grandson.

"Why I Live at the P.O."

The Story.

During her travels through rural Mississippi, Eudora Welty once saw an ironing board set up in a small-town post office. She then began to speculate about possible reasons for such an arrangement, and a story was the result.

1. Sister is the narrator of this story, and the telling of events comes from her perspective alone. How does this affect your reading of the story? Do you believe that everything happened the way that Sister says it does? How does Sister refer to the African American characters she knows or encounters? What does her attitude tell us about Sister?
2. Stella Rondo and her daughter return to China Grove, Mississippi, and move in with Mama, Uncle Rondo, Papa-Daddy, and Sister. Who is missing from this family group? What might be the reason? How do the family members relate to each other? What are the sources of tension between them?
3. What is the relationship between Sister and Stella Rondo? Is this a normal sibling rivalry? Does the small town environment intensify that rivalry? Why might the two sisters be so interested in Mr. Whitaker?
4. Who is Shirley T.? Why might she have received this name? Why is Mama willing to accept Stella-Rondo's assertion that Shirley T. is adopted, but Sister is not?

5. This story contains references that many contemporary readers may find puzzling. Students may want to find answers to the following questions: What is an “Add-a-Pearl” necklace? What role did Flanders Field play in World War I and what famous poem talks about this place? What sort of game is Casino? Who was Nelson Eddy? What is a davenport? Where is Mammoth Cave?
6. The pacing of the story is part of its humor. Does the film of Welty reading the story enhance your appreciation of the humor?

Correspondence. Robert Penn Warren, who accepted a number of Welty stories for the Southern Review, rejected a story titled “Sister.” This story would eventually be called “Why I Live at the P.O.” When Diarmuid Russell became Eudora Welty’s agent, he felt strongly that the story was a gem. He submitted it to the Atlantic Monthly, and did so after that magazine had accepted two other Welty stories and after Welty had signed a contract for her first book. His timing was right, and the story appeared in the Atlantic in early 1941. Here are Warren’s letter of rejection and Russell’s February 1941 letter announcing the Atlantic’s wise acceptance of the story.

Photography. Eudora Welty’s photographs often focus upon the houses and businesses in small Mississippi towns, towns like the fictional China Grove of “Why I Live at the P.O.” Do the pictures of a storekeeper with watermelons and bananas for sale, of a market with local produce, of a man walking down a dirt street carrying a catfish, of a two story house with a star in its crown have anything in common with China Grove? Would you want to live in one of these towns or in a town like China Grove? Why or why not? What does the story say about the nature of small-town life? Might family disputes be a source of drama, even entertainment, in a town without movies or theaters or restaurants? Might a traveling photographer be particularly interesting in a town with a very small population?

Manuscripts. Here is an excerpt from an early draft of “Why I Live at the P.O.” and a complete draft of a much later version of the story. The opening and closing paragraphs of the early draft show marked differences from the published version. The late draft shows Welty still working on details of dialogue and description.

Early Draft:

1. Why might Welty have decided to change the title of her story from “Why I Live in the P.O.” to “Why I Live at the P.O.”? Why might she have decided to change the names of Uncle Adam and Stella Adam to Uncle Rondo and Stella Rondo?
2. At the end of this draft, the main character says, “Here I am and here I’ll stay. I know Uncle Sam’s not going to turn against little me! I just insist I’m as happy as a lark. Tonight I had me a whole sweatheart watermelon to myself, just ate to my

heart's content." In the published version of the story, the character says, "But here I am and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy. And if Stella Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen." Which version do you prefer? Why? Do the changes affect the themes of the story?

Late Draft

Examine the way Welty changed Sister's language as she revised this version of the story. How do the changes affect the characterization of Sister? What does Sister's phrase "*disport* with Ketchup" rather than "eat Ketchup" tell us about her? What does her claim to be watching out for Stella Rondo's "trousseau" rather than her "underwear" suggest about her personality? Why does her assertion that Uncle Rondo is "piecing on the ham" rather than "eating half a ham" suggest? What other changes seem important to you? Why?

"Petrified Man"

The Story.

The beauty parlor was an institution in small towns, and Welty focuses this story upon the issues of social class and gender relations that emerge from the conversations that take place there.

1. Describe the atmosphere of the beauty parlor. How does Leota treat her clients? How does it seem to be a torture chamber as well as a beauty parlor? What does Welty seem to be saying about concepts of beauty and about the American focus on beauty?
2. What is the relationship between Mrs. Fletcher and Leota? How does Mrs. Fletcher demonstrate that she is of a higher social class than Leota? What are Leota's behaviors that Mrs. Fletcher finds appalling? Does class-consciousness play an important role in the story?
3. Why is Mrs. Fletcher so upset that Leota knows that she is pregnant? What does she mean when she says, "If a certain party hadn't found it out and spread it around, it wouldn't be too late even now."
4. How do Leota, Mrs. Pike, and Mrs. Fletcher describe their husbands? Does marriage seem to be a battleground of sorts? Are the women concerned with issues of power?
5. What role does the freak show play in the story's plot and in its thematic structure? Mrs. Fletcher says, "I despise freaks." How does this statement reveal her feelings about her pregnancy?

6. What is Mrs. Pike's attitude toward Mr. Petrie? How do she and Leota respond to the realization that he is a rapist? What does their response tell us about them?
7. What is Billy Boy doing in the beauty shop? Is he part of the battle between the sexes that the female characters are so focused upon?
8. Does the film of Welty reading this story enhance your understanding of it? Do her comments about the story?

Correspondence. The letters we include here indicate the need for both talent and good luck if a story is to be published. In January 1937, Robert Penn Warren, the editor of the Southern Review, rejected "Petrified Man," and Welty burned the only copy of the story in her kitchen wood stove. In February Warren told Welty he was reconsidering his decision about the story. Then, over one year later in March of 1938, Warren reiterated his desire to see the story, and Welty rewrote it from memory. It has become one of her most well-known works. Here are the letters from Warren to Welty.

Photography. Eudora Welty was an ardent photographer whose work was exhibited in New York in 1936 and again in 1937. These photographs were not sources for her stories, but they do offer insight into the stories. Here are some pictures she took of posters advertising "freak shows" at county and state fairs. These shows, popular in the United States from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century featured everything from deformed animals to elaborate hoaxes, from sword swallows and fire eaters to Siamese twins and headless women. Though Welty never attended a "freak show," she found the posters for them both amusing and ominous.

1. How do you respond to the posters of Mule-Faced Woman, Rubber Man, 3-Legged Man, Headless Girl, and Ossified Man? What details in each poster stand out for you?
2. How does Leota describe the "freak show" that she and Mrs. Pike visit. Does her description seem realistic? Does it describe shows that actually traveled the country?
3. Do you think Leota's beauty parlor and her behavior could be considered freakish? In what ways? How do Leota and Mrs. Pike respond to the news of Mr. Petrie's crimes? Are their responses "freakish"?
4. Is the beauty parlor a place where women can express their desires for power without having the men in their lives overhear them? Do the women suggest that they want to "petrify" their men, turn them to stone, take charge of their lives? Are they overstating their desires or powers?

Manuscripts. Great writing does not simply happen. Great writers are typically great revisers. They may add or cut characters or scenes in a second or third draft. And they may hone the details of language as their stories near publication. Note the careful revisions of “Petrified Man” that you find in the draft below. How do the changes affect you as a reader? Do you think Welty attempts to make dialogue more idiomatic? Does she use language to establish a character’s personality or social status? Why might Welty have changed the word “interested” to the phrase “dead to know”? Why might she have replaced the word “pregnant” with the phrase “on the way”? Why might she have decided that Mrs. Fletcher should not use the word “ain’t”? Is it important that revisions have Leota recommending “Stork Allure” dresses or saying “Everybody in New Orleans believes everything spooky”? Why? Do the details Welty inserts into her story that make the story more vivid? You may be interested in Michael A. Benzel’s discussion of the many changes to the story: “Textual Variants in ‘Petrified Man,’” *Eudora Welty Newsletter* 13.1 (Winter 1989): 1-12.

The beauty parlors of the 1930s are far different from the salons of today: what was a “machineless”? a “henna pack”? So too could cars and libraries be different: what was a “rumble seat”? a “drugstore rental book”?

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