

## Notes on “A Worn Path”

In “A Worn Path,” Eudora Welty combines a tight climatic structure with a strong sense of orality. She uses exposition, complication, crisis, climax, and resolution to order the experiences of Phoenix Jackson, but we also see the use of episodic events, “in medias” and a narrator who tells the story to make Phoenix Jackson a hero.

### **Quest Motif:**

We also see elements of the **Quest Motif** to create a hero and illuminate the theme of a noble mission. Most quest stories revolve around an individual’s need to seek and return with a mystical object that will benefit a society or people. The mystical object is usually of healing or spiritual nature and can be concrete or abstract. The Searcher must be proven worthy on a journey through trials or tests of skills, wisdom, and courage. These episodes of testing form the plot and the heart of the narrative with the climatic moment of epiphany often being of secondary interest. Once the hero has been proven worthy and has found the object of the quest, he/she must attempt to bring it back to his land/society/people. This will provide opportunities for further testing and episodes of adventure which can create suspense for the eventual success of the quest itself.

### **God Myth:**

Most god myths have been created by people to explain natural phenomena such as sunrise, sunset, weather, birth, death etc. While gods have special powers and great privileges, they also have responsibilities towards the people who worship them. While they may seem incomprehensible in regards to their attitude and treatment of their people, they ultimately have to share gifts, bestow blessings and make sacrifices to sustain the humans in their control. After all, how much fun is it to be a god if one doesn’t have someone performing the worship?

**Phoenix Myth:** Most cultures have the equivalent of the phoenix myth. The Phoenix bird is associated with the sun, birth, death, sacrifice, and re-birth. In various cultures it is also associated with a person of high moral and intellectual integrity as well as divine power. It is at heart, a result of man’s yearning for immortality. The basic story has the great bird living and thriving until a time of need (determined by many different omens.) When the time has come, the Phoenix builds a large nest, sets it afire and throws itself into the flames to be consumed to ashes. From the ashes and flames, it is reborn and springs whole and renewed to further duty. From this willingness to sacrifice bodily existence, it experiences immortality and wisdom at the cost of great pain and suffering of temporary death.

## Notes on "A Worn Path"

### Prewriting Activities for "A Worn Path"

#### Plot summary

A very old black lady lives out in country. The story starts with her out walking on a path. She rests and has a hallucination about a boy with some marble cake. Then she meets a white hunter who helps her out of a ditch that a dog had knocked her into. He drops a nickel. She distracts him to pick it up and then he points a gun in her face. He admires that she isn't afraid and she goes on her way. She needs to go to the city; we later learn it is for medicine for her grandson. After overcoming many obstacles, Phoenix gets to town and forgets why she is in the big building. The attendant considers her a worthless charity case but the nurse helps her memory. She tricks the attendant to give her five pennies instead of one. She plans to buy a windmill for grandson before heading home. *(this is a very skimpy summary)*

#### Plot Structure Analysis

*Exposition phase:* (first four paragraphs)

- December
- old Negro woman
- cane made from umbrella
- tapping on ground
- frozen earth
- red rag on head
- eyes blue with age
- dark striped dress
- long apron made of sugar sacks
- large unlaced shoes
- old hair smells like copper
- emphasizing animals/ nature surrounding Phoenix
- age and frailty of character
- slow vivid description to set the pace of an old country woman walking

*Complication phase:*

- "path ran up a hill" p. 271 paragraph 5
- First conflict is the "hill"
- Down thru oaks
- Bush caught dress (not possible to allow tear; shows pride and poverty)
- Log across creek (trusts her feet to go "autopilot" instead of using her failing eyes)
- Hallucinating boy with cake (mind failing?)
- Barb wire fence (shows poverty no money for treatment)
- Man? Ghost? Scarecrow! (senses failing?)
- Going was easy for a while
- black dog knocks her into a ditch (so far all environmental conflicts in these encounters)

### Notes on "A Worn Path"

- White Hunter "rescues her" (typical bigot of time period)
- Saucy reply to him. He is confident and superior in his mind.
- Destination is revealed: town. No sir! (not to see Santa Claus)
- Smart/ wily to distract man so she can "steal" his fallen nickel
- Racial issue (social conflict)
- God sees me stealing (psychological conflict of guilt?)
- Old distrust eyes, trust feet from habit of worn path
- Lady with packages "different side of that time"
- That time (speech/packages/perfume clues that she is white?)
- Attendant- snotty treats her "poor"/ nurse- kindness

*Crisis:* (some action or decision is required)

- Why you here Granny?
- the point of her journey and her mind fails her

*Climax:* (what action is taken?)

- Her body has arrived safely but her mind is not present
  - It's your grandson; He isn't dead is he?
  - remembers her grandson; I can tell him apart from all others in creation;
- is love enough to conquer senility?
- She didn't remember without prompting from the Nurse

*Resolution:*

- "tricks" the attendant; gets 5 pennies, instead of one
- leaves to get a gift for her grandson; feet stepping down stairs to return to worn path

### Character List

*Major:*

Phoenix – we see her adventures throughout the story; it is her character which strives towards something; she is protagonist

*Minor:*

White Hunter—is more developed than other minor characters with some sense of his attitudes and personality; mainly functions as a major conflict/obstacle to overcome

Lady with Packages – seems to represent the fact that some humans are generous without an agenda or bigotry

Attendant – is typical in her attitude towards "ignorant charity cases"

Nurse – is businesslike in her manner and her job is to help people so she helps Phoenix without being overly sentimental or meddling

## Notes on “A Worn Path”

### In-Depth Character Analysis

Phoenix

Old & still persevering

Knows the ways of the woods/animals—wise; experienced

Knows how to deal with people to survive and get what she wants—Hunter, Lady, Attendant

Has a sense of feisty humor—“Lying like a Junebug waiting to be turned over”

Pride—clean, tidy, won’t let the thorns tear her dress & wants shoes tied for going into the big building

Has great love for her grandson—willing to walk a long way at great risk to get him medicine

Willing to accept help—with shoes, with pennies, with medicine, with getting out of ditch

Willing to use her wits – to distract Hunter to “steal” the nickel, to keep him from shooting, to get shoes tied, to get 5 pennies

Setting: Poor, rural south; after emancipation but still under “Jim Crow” laws; paper windmills available for purchase but still a novelty for poor children; the place and time heavily influence the social attitudes of the characters

### Symbols

Phoenix – rise from the ashes of sacrifice for the benefit of others

Jackson – well-respected historical/political figure; gain respect and pride by adopting such an important and regular “American” name by a former slave

The Worn Path – cycle of journey to be repeated

Umbrella cane – poverty and age

Theme keywords

-old; aging

-bigotry; love vs. hate or fear in the heart?

-charity/poor ≠ worthless; no dignity; no honor; no love

-all three types of conflict, just like life contains all forms of conflict

-worn path a “life cycle”

-overcomes obstacles

-endures

--humor

--determination

-great love

-old ≠ worthless; force to be reckoned with

***Typical clichés one might think of:***

*Love conquers all*

*No man is an Island*

*We’re Poor, but we’re Proud*

## Notes on “A Worn Path”

*A Nobel Mission makes a Nobel Person  
True Love sacrifices everything*

### **Random thoughts:**

Can love and determination truly conquer all? Can it conquer Death?

Can the reader trust Phoenix’s judgement? Is the grandson alive? Is he going to last? Will she be able to continue to bring him renewed life endlessly? If she eventually fails to get the medicine and return then does that lessen the honor and meaning of her cycle of sacrifice?

Social and environmental challenges/conflicts become rather insignificant in the face of losing your mind/spirit due to age; if the essence of your mind cannot last and overcome all obstacles then what does that mean for us?

Does the Worn Path indicate a never-ending journey even after physical existence? We know her body will eventually end but will her love and willingness to sacrifice?

So after you ponder these things, you will need to articulate your idea of what the main concept or philosophy this story suggests to you. Write it as a universal statement rather than a story specific statement: e.g. “When love is selfless it provides the determination to endure hardships and self-sacrifice.”

Rather than, “Phoenix Jackson’s selfless love for her Grandson provides her with the determination to overcome her obstacles.”

Then the point of your essay becomes stating your premise (idea) explaining your premise, providing evidence to support your premise regarding your theories.

One can write about any narrative element, any combination of the elements, how the author developed or used narrative technique, how meaning is created for the reader, etc. There are many approaches for writing about short stories.

Possible approaches for thinking/writing critically about “A Worn Path”:

1. Elements of linear plot
  - a. Exposition
  - b. Complication
  - c. Crisis
  - d. Climax
  - e. Resolution
2. Elements of oral narration
  - a. Episodes

### Notes on “A Worn Path”

- b. In medias res
- c. Tone
- d. Point of view
- 3. Elements of the Quest
  - a. Central character as hero
  - b. Journey
  - c. Episodes of obstacles
  - d. Noble mission
  - e. Mystical healing object
  - f. Difficulty of return
- 4. Types of conflicts
  - a. Physical
  - b. Social
  - c. Psychological
- 5. Importance of setting
  - a. Time period
  - b. Wilderness
  - c. Community
- 6. Importance of character
  - a. Age
  - b. Poverty
  - c. Senility
  - d. Dignity
  - e. Selflessness
  - f. Wisdom
- 7. Keywords of theme
  - a. Poverty
  - b. Prejudice
  - c. Aging
  - d. Sacrifice
  - e. Determination

#### Sample thesis statements:

In “A Worn Path” the setting is an integral part of the plot structure due to the main character’s age and poverty, as well as the social limitations of the time period.

Physical, social and psychological obstacles encountered by Phoenix Jackson create the pattern of conflicts in the plot of “A Worn Path.”

“A Worn Path” is structured as a quest due to the trials and triumphs of Phoenix Jackson in her noble journey to obtain the bottle of healing liquid.

**Notes on “A Worn Path”**

Conflicts based on setting, character, and theme control the plot of “A Worn Path.”

In general, the most powerful and interesting essays deal with how the narrative elements in the story create and support your interpretation of theme. This type of essay requires higher critical thinking than simply breaking down and listing the parts of the plot structure, or how the reader gets to know the character through action, speech, and appearance, or how the time period influenced the plot.