

RADICAL TEACHER

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Addressing Ageism through Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"

by Regina Dilgen



At Palm Beach State College, where I teach English, I have found my classes deeply responsive to Eudora Welty's 1941 "A Worn Path." This much anthologized short story allows readers to enter an elderly woman's reality and to experience her perceptions. The protagonist Phoenix Jackson is on a journey she makes twice a year to a clinic for medicine to treat her grandson, who has been injured by swallowing lye. Her journey, a walk of many miles on part of the Natchez Trace in Mississippi, reveals her courage and tenacity, and, more broadly, also symbolically explores the obstacles she has faced throughout her life on this Worn Path. Phoenix is old, black, a woman, and impoverished. The intersection of these aspects of her reality allows students to understand the complexities of identity in a hierarchical society. Phoenix's rising out of the over-determination of this culture, as her name implies, is what the reader comes to appreciate.

Age is an important component of Phoenix's identity as she makes her journey of love for her grandson, and she is of an older generation than all the other characters in the work. Referring to the end of the Civil War, Phoenix explains how her background has defined her: "'I never did go to school, I was too old at the Surrender,' she said in a soft voice. 'I'm an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me. My little grandson, he is just the same, and I forgot it in the coming ' ' " (222). The reader becomes aware of her reality in historical context as, throughout the work, Phoenix is treated disrespectfully, due to her age and other aspects of her oppression. When she encounters a hunter—young, white, and male—and he points a gun at her, we comprehend her positioning. The hunter addresses her with arrogance and entitlement: "'Well, Granny,' he said, 'you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing. I'd give you a dime if I had any money with me. But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you'" (220). Although she will not give up, Phoenix acknowledges the very real challenges she faces as an elderly person. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know" (218). And yet she behaves with wisdom and tolerance. When the hunter assesses her, "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!" (219), we understand that the character with the limited insights into others is the one in the more privileged position. What is it like to be an elderly woman in this complex context? The narrative lets the reader understand this character's reality and the value of her life of caring for others: her path is truly well worn.

A form of prejudice that is pervasive in America is ageism. And yet it is invisible to many, seeming naturally existing, and thus normalized. Negative attitudes toward the elderly often are not even hidden; this is a group our culture tells us it is okay to feel superior to. Think of the jokes about the elderly: as bad drivers, as rude, as ridiculous. Yet the ultimate irony is that the aged are us. They are our beloved grandparents and parents; indeed they will be us, if we are fortunate.

What does it say about a culture if it does not provide models of what it can mean to enter the last decades of our lives, and to live them with meaning and dignity? Images of the elderly in the media are often simply absent; it is hard to find positive, realistic representations of older men and women. It is well known that we are a youth valorizing culture. We try to erase any signs of aging through plastic surgery and other means. Youth and beauty are conflated, and the elderly are not valued as they should be for their wisdom, for their connections to all of us and to our history.

This literary short story allows for meaningful discussion of how we see and interact with those of other generations, and of the complexities of their lives in specific historical context. And "A Worn Path" does not deny death. Her grandson might not recover fully from this injury; Phoenix, who falls and has delusions on the walk, may not make it back from town. She certainly will not make this trip many more times. But her journey has great meaning. It is a pleasure to teach this story, and to see the empathy and compassion with which students respond to the fully realized character, although she is much further along the path than they are.

Work Cited

Welty, Eudora. "A Worn Path." *Literature: A Portable Anthology*. 3rd ed. Ed. Janet E. Gardner, et al. New York: Bedford/St. Martins 2013. 216-223. Print.



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