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## Analysis Of A Worn Path Short Story

### A Worn Path

During the time of slavery and the decades after, social class struggles were obvious and predominant. In a white world, African Americans struggled under great oppression and even after they were given freedom from slavery they were still held by the bondage of social status. Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" gives a clear view of this bondage and shows the reader the hardships endured by African Americans even after they were made legally free. The lack of racial harmony is easily seen throughout the entirety of "A Worn Path," especially as the old woman nears town, and Welty makes it a point to show how social status influences and affects Phoenix, the main character and subject of the short story, and the people that she encounters on her trip into town.

One of the largest social ranking points brought up within the story is that of white people, notably males, considering themselves better than the blacks. Knowledge of the time period allows us to understand that many whites thought of themselves as higher and mightier than black simply because they were white and had held control for such a long time. The white hunter that helps old Phoenix out of the ditch gives plenty of examples of this attitude held by the whites. One of the first things that he does upon helping her out and discovering where she is heading it put down her journey. He calls her out on it saying, "Why, that's too far! That's as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble." In this we see him being full of himself as a young white male and attempting to say that since he only goes that far that there is no way an old black woman could make the journey. This idea of whites being better than blacks simply because of their social status is seen again a few paragraphs later in Phoenix's response to the white man after having a gun pointed at her. When he asks if she is afraid she simply replies, "No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done." Here we see that she has experienced similar things before, which shows the reader that it is not just this one hunter that holds himself as better than the blacks. His willingness, and the willingness of the others Phoenix hints at, to point a gun at a black woman without fear of the consequences does nothing but drive home the fact that white men truly did not fear the blacks because they considered themselves to be better than them.

Social status, along with causing whites to put themselves above blacks, also caused most of the white Americans to interact with African Americans in condescending ways. The first example of this comes when the young white hunter scoffs at the old woman's insistence on heading into town. "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!" he tells her with a laugh. He has no knowledge of her reasons for heading into town, but he stereotypes her and attempts to tear her spirits down with his tone and attitude. Since he believes himself to be better than her, he has no problem talking to her in such a rude tone. This same tone is seen again once Phoenix reaches the town when she first enters the "big building" and the attendant sees her. Without even asking what she is there for or who she is, the attendant comments, "A

charity case, I suppose." This comment exemplifies the attitude that whites held towards African Americans. Since Welty has already shown the reader that whites believe themselves to be

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better than blacks, the comment of the attendant allows one to see just how much of a condescending tone whites used with their 'inferiors.' To them, an old black woman entering the building must certainly be nothing more than a poor elderly person coming looking for a handout or something similar. There is no sign that the attendant gave any real thought to the true needs of Phoenix.

Social class clearly plays a large role in this story, and one can understand its influence as one begins to understand the depth of the old woman's poverty. When the attendant gives her a second nickel her exuberance is seen when she says that she is going to buy her grandson a present and that, "He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world." She is excited to bring her grandson a small present along with the medicine, and the fact that he will be amazed to see something so small helps one understand the poverty that the two of them live in. This poverty comes largely from their social standing as African Americans. Knowing a little bit of history it is easy to understand this poverty, as many African Americans still lived in excessive poverty even after "The Surrender" and their freedom from slavery. However, even without this knowledge, we can understand the poverty of Phoenix when she explains to the nurse that, "I never did go to school; I was too old at the Surrender." This Surrender refers to the time when the last of the slaves became free, legal people living in America, and since she was too old to be allowed to go to school after the slaves had all been freed, she was never able to learn things necessary to getting a job or making a living for her and her grandson. Along with this, the two of them live alone off in the woods, and this alone stands to show their separation from the world of the white man and his riches.

The struggles of the old woman herself are clear throughout "A Worn Path," and social structure clearly plays a massive role in her hardships, but Welty used more than just Phoenix and her encounters to give examples of the differences seen between where the whites and blacks sat on the social ladder. In fact, when one looks at the short story as a whole, it is clear that Welty intended for the entire journey to be a symbol in and of itself of the struggle blacks had with the social classes of the time period. The journey of Phoenix from her house to the town is a symbol of the long and hard path that African Americans had even after "The Surrender." When Phoenix first begins her journey she comes to a hill where she says "Something always take a hold of me on this hill – pleads I should stay." This hill is an example along Phoenix's journey that symbolizes one of the many obstacles African Americans had to conquer on their path to racial freedom and social equality. Then, on her way down the other side, "a bush caught her dress." She talks to the thorns saying, "You doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir." The thorns are yet another example of people and social classes holding back Phoenix and other blacks from their full potential. As she continues her journey this idea of the story itself being on large symbol becomes more and more clear as Welty piles on more and more examples, such as the log across the creek and the dog knocking her into the ditch where she meets the white hunter.

Through knowledge of the history of the time period and reading through Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" a few times, it is easy to see the underlying themes of social differentiation and class ties and how they affected the African American population. Welty does a splendid job of weaving these themes into the short story, and this is done in such a way that one can clearly see how social classes affect the characters, their interactions, and the tale as a whole. Through the white hunter, the attendant in the "big building," the immense poverty of Phoenix, and her journey as a whole, one can easily pick out social interactions of the time period. This piece was written in perfect harmony with the time period of discord it is associated with.

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