

Aren't you ashamed, the mother yelled at her. Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of the doctor?

Get me a smooth-handled spoon of some sort, I told the mother. We're going through with this. The child's mouth was already bleeding. Her tongue was cut and she was screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. Perhaps I should have desisted and come back in an hour or more. No doubt it would have been better. But I have seen at least two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases, and feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it.

The damned little brat must be protected against her own idiocy, one says to one's self at such times. Others must be protected against her. It is a social necessity. And all these things are true. But a blind fury, a feeling of adult shame, bred of a longing for muscular release are the operatives. One goes on to the end.

In the final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was—both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes. [1938]

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. Describe the conflicting emotions of the doctor and the little girl.
2. What can be said to justify the doctor's actions? What can be said to criticize the doctor's actions? What can be said to justify the girl's actions? What can be said to criticize the girl's actions?
3. Why would some critics think the idea of being blind in all its literal and metaphorical meanings is a key idea in this story?
4. Explain the doctor's relationship to the child's parents. Why at one point does the doctor say about the father, "I wanted to kill him" (para. 22)?
5. What possible comment on human nature does the story make? What might the story be saying about the consequence of violence?

EUDORA WELTY A Worn Path

Eudora Welty (1909–2001)—Mississippi—is considered one of the best writers for the New York Times Book Review. She studied at the University of Mississippi. She began writing stories for the Saturday Evening Post in the Atlantic Monthly. Her first novel was *Delta Wedding* (1942), which was followed by *Lionel Lincoln* (1943). Her second novel, *One of Us Was Strange* (1945), won the Pulitzer Prize. Her last novel, *The Optimist* (1972), won the Pulitzer Prize. Her critical life, her critics have called it "a life of the heart's enigma," was honored with the Pulitzer Prize in 1941.

It was December—a bright country there was an old Negro woman walking along a path through the woods. She was very old and small and shrunken. She had a little from side to side in her head like a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She had an umbrella, and with it she was like the chirping of a sparrow.

She wore a dark sateen dress and an equally long apron of blue and white. But every time she took a step she dragged from her unbuttoned dress a piece of white with age. Her skin had turned yellow and as though a whole sun had been on her golden color ran under her skin by a yellow burning. Her neck in the frailty of her old age was like a piece of old rope.

Now and then she would look back over her shoulder at my way, all you folks. Keep out from under my feet. Keep out from under my path. Don't get in my way." Under her smile she was like a would switch at the end of a string.

On she went. Her eyes were almost too bright for the day. Her light as feathers. She was late for him.