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Welty's THE WORN PATH

In the notes that accompany his epic poem "The Waste Land," T. S. Eliot says of the blind prophet Tiresias, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', [he] is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (218). For Eliot, Tiresias serves as a medium through which characters can transform themselves, a character who links both past events and future occurrences. A similar character exists in Eudora Welty's short story "The Worn Path." Phoenix Jackson, herself a blind seer of sorts, reveals through a difficult pilgrimage many of the themes that Welty attempts to convey. As Tiresias witnesses the transformation of the merchant into the Phoenician sailor, so Phoenix Jackson witnesses the Southern black's transformation from slave to citizen. In Welty's "The Worn Path," Phoenix Jackson's thoughts and perceptions, as well as her encounters with other characters, illustrate the theme of impending black equality and amalgamation in the South after the Civil War.

Phoenix's perseverance is soon noticeable, as she pleads with a higher being to "keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don't let none of those come running in my direction. I got a long way" (142). This woman of one hundred years, nearly blind, and with a cane, struggles onward up the "worn path," toward the city to obtain medicine for her grandson. A parallel exists between the journey described and the plight of the Southern blacks after the Civil War. The Thirteenth Amendment made black people legally free, but their place in a society in which they were previously considered three-fifths of a person was certainly in question. Like Phoenix, they endured an endless struggle, if not against scurrying hogs, then against the thorny bush that "never want to let folks pass" (143).

At times, Welty is even more obvious with her imagery. As Phoenix climbs up the tiresome hill that the path traverses, she notes that it "seems like there is chains on my feet, time I get this far" (143). The unsettling reference to the bound slaves that Phoenix can recall from her long life is clear, yet she continues. While resting on a log, Phoenix has an almost hallucinatory vision: She envisions a boy offering her a piece of marble cake, a proposition, Phoenix says "that would be acceptable" (143). The vision of a slice of black

and white cake appears to be a reference to the idea of integration in the South. But "when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air" (143), an unattainable dream, a utopian fantasy, and Phoenix's struggle continues through the barbed wire and dead corn (144).

The quest for integration seems more hopeful as Phoenix walks out of the woods and into the brightly lit town that is her destination. Upon entering the medical building, Phoenix has an epiphany of sorts, for gazing at the wall, she notices "the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head" (147). Phoenix dreams about the day when degrees hang on her grandson's bedroom wall, when blacks can go to college. As she is leaving the doctor's office, Phoenix, with only two nickels in her pocket, has promised to buy her grandson "a little windmill they sells, made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there is such a thing in the world" (149). Welty has created through Phoenix a modern Don Quixote. Her grandson's sparring with the windmills will be his quest for freedom, for equality in this new world that has been opened up for him.

The characters Phoenix encounters on this pilgrimage all represent attitudes of whites in the South after the war. Her first encounter is with a hunter who, after running off a black dog, remarks, "Well, I scared him off that time" (146). Welty uses the symbol of the white hunter scaring off the black dog to show the strength of Phoenix's dignity: "'Doesn't the gun scare you?' he said, pointing it at her. 'No, Sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day'" (146). The hunter's attempt to instill fear in Phoenix, a fear she disposed of years ago as she came to terms with her plight in society, fails. The hunter's parting advice for Phoenix comes in the form of a threat: "But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you" (146). Phoenix realizes that the importance of the trip far exceeds the possible harm that can be done to her brittle frame. The incident with the hunter symbolizes the resiliency of the black movement toward equality.

In the medical building, the attendant, upon seeing Phoenix, dismisses her with, "Charity case, I suppose" (147). When asked by the nurse about her grandson, Phoenix replies, "We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don't seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last" (148). The adoration of her grandson are the final words Phoenix speaks to another character in the book, a parting premonition that the struggle is going to last. Much like the incident with the hunter, Phoenix reiterates here that conflicts are just stones in the road, obstacles in the path.

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Rich's POWER

Adrienne Rich's poem "Power," which provides a moving and sympathetic account of Marie Curie, is significant not only for its overt portrait of a famous female scientist, but also for its implicit criticism of male power misused. The poem contrasts two lives—one, a dedicated scientist who sacrifices self for the world; the other, an implicit, nondescript male "doctor" who exploits others for personal gain. The poem's construction of gender is complex and indirect and is embedded in the central symbol of the first five lines: a bottle of tonic that has been unearthed by a backhoe.

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate

From this point, the poem shifts direction and concentrates on the life of Marie Curie. Students are frequently confused as to the purpose of these opening lines. What relationship do they bear to the rest of the poem? Why the sudden leap to Marie Curie? Why the title, "Power"? Even most published critical studies have failed to illuminate these lines. For example, in her study *The Aesthetics of Power*, Claire Keyes remarks that "no explicit connection is made between the artifact and Marie Curie, except to suggest that neither the tonic in the bottle nor Curie's radium has especially cured humanity's ills," and thus concludes that the "poem's abstractions make it less effective than it could be" (164). Alice Templeton's commentary on the poem in *The Dream and the Dialogue* fails to elucidate the lines as well, as the critic concentrates only on Curie and suggests that the bottle represents a kind of "buried history" (75), though what this history is, Templeton does not make clear.

Given what we know of Rich's feminist poetics of the early 1970s, the bottle of tonic is likely a symbolic reference to quackery, an indirect analogy to charlatans who looked for opportunities to exploit others for financial gain, and ultimately for power. The lines referring to a tonic that can cure fever and melancholy hark back to the language of those peddlers and self-styled "physicians" who confidently claimed that their medicines were the answer to everything from scarlet fever to sexual impotence. A common feature in