

A Worn Path



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUDORA WELTY

Eudora Welty grew up in a close-knit family and received her undergraduate education at Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus and the University of Wisconsin. She also did graduate work at Columbia University School of Business. She published her first story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" in 1936, to much acclaim. A writer of both short stories and novels focused predominantly on the American South, she was particularly famous for her short stories, though she also won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Optimist's Daughter* in 1973. In her later years she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the French Legion of Honor. She died of cardiovascular failure after a short illness at the age of 92.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though "A Worn Path" was written in 1941 and seems to take place at that time period, Phoenix Jackson was born in the antebellum South, a period before the Civil War when slavery was legal in the United States. The end of the Civil War in 1865 and the adoption of the 13th Amendment in the same year marked the end of slavery. The following years until, until 1877, are classified as the Reconstruction era, during which the federal government transition Southern states back into the Union. The story, however, takes place in 1941, when Jim Crow laws were fully in effect in the Deep South. These were state and local laws that were put into effect after Reconstruction that allowed unequal and segregated treatment of blacks and that great disadvantaged black people in every sector of society.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Worn Path" bears some commonalities with works of fiction by writers including William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor, who deal with the questions and consequences of racial tension in the United States South, often through characters, like Phoenix Jackson, who are unusual or are outsiders in their communities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Worn Path
- **When Written:** 1940
- **Where Written:** Mississippi
- **When Published:** February 1941
- **Literary Period:** Realism/Southern Gothic

- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** From Old Natchez Trace to Natchez, Mississippi
- **Climax:** Phoenix raises her "free hand"
- **Antagonist:** White society
- **Point of View:** Third person limited (Phoenix Jackson)

EXTRA CREDIT

Odd Jobs. Immediately after college, Welty worked at WJDX radio station, wrote society columns for a local newspaper, and was a publicity agent from the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression.

Photographer. Before writing fiction, Welty was a photographer who was even exhibited in New York. However, it was not until 1971 that her first book of photographs was published.



PLOT SUMMARY

A very old and frail black woman named Phoenix Jackson makes a long and difficult journey on a **path** from the country into the town. She carries a cane and switches it at imagined animals in the bushes. Her skirt gets tangled on thorns and she crosses a log over a river with her eyes closed. Seeing a buzzard and wondering what it is looking at, she muses on the difficulty of her task and the help God grants her.

Phoenix mistakes a black **scarecrow** for a man or a ghost. When she realizes it is in fact just a scarecrow she is happy and dances with it for a moment. She finally makes it to a wagon track and thinks the journey will now be easier for her. But a black dog appears, and though she strikes at it with her cane, it ends up knocking her into a ditch. As she can't help herself, she waits until someone comes to help her.

A white hunter pulls her out of the ditch and asks her about where she comes from and where she lives. When she tells him she is going to town, he condescendingly suggests that she won't get anything from her journey, and he assumes she's going to see Santa Claus as it's Christmastime. Noticing that a nickel has fallen out of the hunter's pocket, Phoenix goads the hunter to get rid of the black dog that knocked her down by claiming that "the big black dog" isn't "scare of nobody." While the hunter chases after it, Phoenix picks up the nickel. When the hunter returns, he casually points his gun at Phoenix and asks if she's scared. Phoenix responds that she isn't scared, that she's seen people killed for less than she's ever done, and he tells her he would give her a dime if he had any money. They part ways.

Reaching Natchez, Phoenix is overwhelmed by all the lights but allows her muscle memory to take her to the big building where she needs to go. Before entering the building she stops to ask a woman carrying Christmas presents to tie her shoes. She wants to appear dignified before she enters the big building. The woman obliges, though a bit gruffly.

Entering the big building, Phoenix climbs up the flight of stairs and stops before a document with a gold seal in a gold frame. "Here I be", she says. An attendant in this office immediately assumes she is a "charity case" and harangues Phoenix, who has ceased to talk as she has gone into a kind of reverie (seemingly from exhaustion), but a nurse comes out and identifies her and reveals that she comes to the doctor's office regularly. The nurse asks about Phoenix's young grandson's wellbeing, and explains that the grandson swallowed lye and now requires medication. Though the boy's case is difficult and the nurse seems skeptical, Phoenix remains confident that he is "going to last."

The nurse brings out the medicine, which is given to Phoenix as charity as long as she can come to the doctor's office to get it. The attendant, noting that it's Christmastime, asks if Phoenix would like a few pennies. Phoenix asks for a nickel, which she gets. Phoenix then takes out her other nickel and places the two of them side by side. She declares that she will buy a **paper windmill** for her grandson. Raising her "free hand", she walks away slowly.

casually points a gun at her to see if it frightens her. The casualness of his action speaks to how little he actually cares for her as a human, and expresses his sense of racial superiority. The hunter also tells Phoenix that she should give up her journey and go back home, as he cannot imagine her – or any black person – possessing a legitimate reason for being out on the road to go to town. Condescending and superior, the hunter still gets duped by Phoenix when she takes advantage of his racism and urges him to get rid of the "big black dog" who isn't "scared of nobody." Ironically, he later tells her that he would give her a dime if he had any money, though he does not realize that she has already taken the nickel that has fallen out of his pocket.

Grandson – For Phoenix, her grandson represents the future of her family, and perhaps, for black people in general. Though we never get to see him, we do know that he suffers greatly after having swallowed lye a few years earlier as a young boy. The nurse in the city seems to believe that his hopes for the future are rather dim, yet Phoenix is confident that the boy will endure, saying that he "will last." Phoenix not only wants to give her grandson his needed medicine, it is revealed at the end of the story that she also wants to him a sense of the wonder and possibility in the world in the form of the **paper windmill**.

Nurse – The nurse knows Phoenix from her twice annual visits to the doctor's office. Though she is sympathetic to Phoenix, she is also a bit impatient when Phoenix is slow to respond to her and seems to consider her own time more important than Phoenix's. She gives Phoenix the medicine and marks it down as charity.

Attendant – On first looking at Phoenix in the doctor's office, the attendant assumes that Phoenix is a "charity case". She is fairly rude and condescending, haranguing Phoenix for failing to give immediate answers rather than caring about Phoenix's well-being. Noting that it's Christmastime, she offers Phoenix a few pennies as charity, and gives in when Phoenix asks for a nickel. This nickel allows Phoenix to buy the **paper windmill**.

Woman – Phoenix stops this woman on the street and asks the woman to tie her (Phoenix's) shoes. The woman, who is probably white, obliges, and kneels down in a scene reminiscent of Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet. Yet, at the same time, the woman gruffly tells Phoenix to stand still, indicating her distaste and sense of superiority.



CHARACTERS

Phoenix Jackson – Phoenix, an aged and frail but also fierce woman (she was born into slavery in the pre-Civil-War South, though the story takes place in 1940), will not allow anything in her **path** to stop her from getting to her end goal, which is to retrieve medicine in town for her grandson. Though on her journey from her rural home into the Mississippi town of Natchez – which she has made several times before – she is confronted with both natural obstacles and racially tense encounters, she works through them with dignity, grace, and quite a bit of cleverness. Though her journey exhausts her emotionally and physically, she is seen through by her indefatigable optimism, faith in God, and love for her grandson. By the end of the story she has stated her place in the world and reaffirmed her hope in and for her grandson, and her perseverance and enduring hope in continuing to carve out her worn path – both the path into town and the path of her life – she reaffirms a kind of hope for all the powerless. She also functions as a Christ figure in the story.

Hunter – The hunter appears relatively briefly in the story, but he unforgettably exemplifies the racial politics that Phoenix has to deal with in her day-to-day life. Though at first he aids Phoenix when she has fallen in a ditch, he afterwards rather



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RACE AND CLASS

In its depiction of the journey of an impoverished black woman in Mississippi, “A Worn Path” explores the realities of race and class in the South at a time when slavery was still within living memory. The depiction of race in the story is not simplistic. Rather, through Phoenix’s experiences with other people, Welty shows the complicated ways that blacks and whites interact in the early 1940s South, with single encounters shifting within moments from kindness to menace, helpfulness to command. Symbolically, perhaps unexpectedly, a black dog and a black **scarecrow** derail Phoenix’s journey, suggesting how the fact of their race disadvantages black people. Meanwhile, a white hunter who at first helps Phoenix to her feet after she’s fallen then points a gun at her, threatening her in an almost casual manner, a reflection of the privilege afforded to white people at that time in the South and the fundamental disregard whites had for the security or comfort of black people. However, at the end of the story, after successfully reaching the city and getting medicine for her sick grandson and gathering together ten cents in the process, Phoenix raises her “free arm” and thinks of the present she will buy her grandson. In this way her own path from slavery to freedom is emphasized, and Phoenix’s grandson becomes a symbol of the possibility of a better future of black people, though his illness suggests that possibility is by no means assured.

Phoenix is described as an incredibly poor woman, and she is acutely aware of the trapping of class. She desires, for example, that her shoes be tied so she has some dignity before entering what seems to be the town hospital. At the same time, Phoenix is not above stealing a bit of money, as when she distracts the hunter and slyly nicks a nickel. After her theft, though, she worries about her vulnerability to punishment as a poor black woman, reflecting that she has seen “plenty [guns] go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done”. Later, in the hospital, the attendant gives her a nickel as charity, and while standing “stiffly” she “carefully” accepts the coin. From these instances we understand that Phoenix is both proud and clever, thinking highly of herself but not above getting the money and medicine she needs through whatever means she can, while also being aware of the potential debasement and dangers of her position. Money becomes a tool of empowerment for Phoenix, even as the stealing and the charity suggest a separation of classes. That she then uses the money not to buy the bare necessities but rather for a relatively luxurious – and certainly delicate – paper windmill that will show her grandson the wonders of the world suggests her hope of what the future holds and the way that having hope fuels her will to go on, but also the fragility of achieving those hopes in a world of unyielding racial and class divisions.



PERSEVERANCE AND POWER

The story’s title, “A Worn Path”, first and most obviously refers to the **path** Phoenix has walked many times before to Natchez to get medicine for her sick grandson. But the title also alludes to the idea of life – and Phoenix’s life in particular – as a journey that is made by repeated passage through and endurance of the world around her, and suggests that such endurance has a slow power that will ultimately leave behind a mark or “path” through that world.

As she walks to Natchez, Phoenix must contend with unequal dynamics of power that are inherently tied to her age, her race, and her class. And yet Phoenix endures. Though she falls in a ditch and has to be rescued by the white hunter, she refuses his urgings to turn back and go home. In fact, Phoenix does more than endure. Her interactions suggest that she has learned how to use her supposedly helpless position in her own favor. She asks the hunter to save her from a dog and manages to steal his nickel. She plays into the preconceptions that the attendant and nurse in the hospital hold about her, and receives free medicine and another nickel. The duality of Phoenix’s inner fortitude and social weakness—which becomes a type of power—occur throughout the story.

Phoenix’s journey on this “worn path”, filled with hardship as it is, is one that she has completed repeatedly, “like clockwork.” That she not only obtains the medicine but also enough money to buy her grandson a present – and has refused to become so beaten down by a hard life that she still wants to show her grandson the wonder of the world through that present – shows how perseverance can give power even to those in positions of weakness. That Phoenix’s triumph might seem small is no mark against it, and in fact might be taken as an argument that it is these “small”, everyday triumphs, that might eventually carve the “worn path” that brings Phoenix, and perhaps the blacks of the post-slavery South in general, out of their powerlessness.



LOVE

Phoenix might at times, due to age, forget the object of her mission, but this only underscores the deep love that motivates her to complete it. The reader is always aware of this underlying aspect of her journey, but as the story progresses and Phoenix steals the nickel from the hunter and then asks for another nickel from the hospital attendant, the story seems to complicate Phoenix’s love for her grandson with a sense that Phoenix is also out for a kind of personal gain. When it is revealed that Phoenix risked her life for the hunter’s nickel and her dignity for the nickel at the hospital all in order to have the money to buy her grandson a gift that will give him a sense of the wonders of the world, those complications die away and the force of her love for her

grandson surges through the story. Phoenix's love is not just one of loyalty or obligation—she endures the journey not just to keep her grandson alive and comfortable. Her love is more profound—she endures the journey to give her grandson a sense of what's possible in the world, to give him hope. Just as a **phoenix** rises from its own ashes, Phoenix's love offers her descendants a tiny step up, but also everything she can offer, in helping them rise up in the world.



NATURE AND CITY

"A Worn Path" begins in a rural area some distance outside the city of Natchez, Mississippi and moves along with Phoenix as she walks towards the

hospital in the center of the city. The rural road is arduous, causing Phoenix to fall into a ditch, and at that moment it seems likely that Phoenix's trip will get easier once she gets into the "paved city." Yet there are also aspects of nature that fill Phoenix with joy, and as she enters the city it becomes clear that while the physical **path** is more sure, there is danger, perhaps greater danger, in the social realities of a populated place.

At first, the hunter, who lives in the city but goes out in the country to hunt, attempts to dissuade Phoenix from going to the city at all, essentially asserting that it is a place where she does not belong. When Phoenix does reach the city, her lack of place there is emphasized by her inability to read the document on the wall of the doctor's office. The city requires an education Phoenix never received. Yet Phoenix asserts her belonging and presence in the city – her right to occupy the entirety of the world around her – by proclaiming, "Here I be."



HUMAN DIGNITY

By persevering, by refusing to yield to the inequality forced upon her by her age, race, and class, by demonstrating calm, smarts, and willpower

in the face of all obstacles, Phoenix exemplifies a remarkable degree of dignity. Phoenix never appears afraid or threatened, even when, most dramatically, the hunter aims his gun directly at her. Her sense of dignity is evident also when she insists on her shoes being tied, or in the "stiff" and "careful" way she accepts the charity of a nickel given to her. She neither rails against injustice nor stoops in the face of condescension. She proceeds always towards her goal, never losing faith that what she wants is something she deserves, and lets no obstacle derail her.

Phoenix and her journey also offer those she meets the opportunity to respond with the same dignity that she displays, and to do so despite the complicated power dynamics of racial and class divisions in the South. However, not everyone takes the opportunity to treat her with dignity, or even when they do that dignity is complicated by their other behavior. The hunter

helps Phoenix but then threatens her, if jokingly, reminding her of the violence done to black people both during slavery and of the lynchings that were common in the post-Slavery South. The hospital attendant gives her a nickel but condescends to her. The woman on the street ties her shoes, but not without issuing a command of her own. In this way the story portrays the ways that common human dignity can both overcome and then, in turn, be by overcome by the vicious divisions of race and class.



CHRISTIAN OVERTONES

Phoenix, seeing a bird flying overhead shortly after stealing the nickel, takes the creature to embody God's judging gaze. "A Worn Path" abounds with

Christian images and ideas, from the way Phoenix's journey on the worn **path** seems to echo the path etched by Christ carrying the cross, to the way that the woman tying Phoenix's shoes recalls Mary Magdalene's washing of Christ's feet. A **phoenix** is a bird that rises from its own ashes, a kind of resurrection evocative of Christ's own. Consequently, the reader can see Phoenix as a type of Christ figure. By connecting Phoenix's journey to the "journey" of Christ, Welty elevates Phoenix's small journey to help her grandson into something more profound, suggesting that the "worn path" Jesus tread is not so different from that walked by Phoenix, and by extension that God's judging gaze is watching, also, how those who encounter Phoenix treat her.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PHOENIX

There is no question that Welty knew what she was doing when she chose to name the main character of "A Worn Path" Phoenix Jackson. A Phoenix is a mythological creature that lives for five centuries before burning to ashes. After burning, the creature rises back to life as a young bird from these ashes and the cycle repeats itself without end. That Phoenix shares a name with such a creature reflects her indefatigable nature, her constant striving towards her goal, as well as her unflagging optimism and high spirits. The name also suggests Phoenix's longevity: though the story takes place in 1941, she was already too old in 1865 to go to school. Like a phoenix, too, she makes her journey again and again without failure. Finally, the phoenix was also seen as a symbol for Christ, who was also resurrected. And so Phoenix's name also marks her as a Christ figure in the story.



THE WORN PATH

The story can be thought of as a kind of road trip. Phoenix travels over many different kinds of surfaces, from sand, to wagon trails, to sidewalks. She also encounters many obstacles along her path, from the thorns to the stream crossing, to the hunter, **scarecrow**, and the lone dog. Some of the obstacles are foreseen; most are surprises to her. These shifting elements of the path she walks symbolize Phoenix's life, with its many and nearly constant difficulties, and yet it also symbolizes the way that, through perseverance, Phoenix has been able to slowly carve out a path through those difficulties, even if it is faint and tenuous. Further, it is possible to see the symbol of the worn path as representative of not just Phoenix's life, but also the lives of all Southern black people – an encapsulation of the idea that it is both brutally hard and also vital and possible to wear down a path to a better life despite terrible obstacles.



THE SCARECROW

At first, Phoenix misidentifies the scarecrow as a black man or a dancing ghost. Both initial reactions reflect a longstanding and very local history of violence against black people, particularly black males. Phoenix has lived through much of this history and its changing iterations as the country in which she lives has transitioned from slavery to other forms of oppression and subjugation, including the poverty and racism that Phoenix herself experiences. The scarecrow represents all the potential of black lives that had been lost through the constraining shackles of slavery, lynchings, and general poverty and legal repression.



THE PAPER WINDMILL

At the very end of the story, newly equipped with two nickels, Phoenix decides to buy her grandson a paper windmill. While before she has been concerned only with practicalities, her newfound money—a kind of economic freedom—allows Phoenix to think about a wonder of the world that she can give to her grandson. Though the windmill is beautiful, it is also something that harnesses nature into energy, and reflects the hope that her grandson might use his natural abilities, now that they are both free, to some greater good. However, the fact that the windmill is paper reminds us that the hope is a fragile one, and one that is contingent on historical and social forces beyond Phoenix and her grandson.

A Worn Path Quotes

☞ “Seems like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far...Something always takes a hold of me on this hill—pleads I should stay.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

The story opens by introducing Phoenix, an elderly black woman wearing a red rag and unlaced shoes that keep almost tripping her up. Occasionally, she has to shoo animals away, but despite the difficulty of the journey, she perseveres. In this passage, Phoenix reflects that it feels like there are chains on her feet, but that there is nonetheless something about the hill that "pleads" for her to keep going (or "stay" on the path). This point emphasizes the extent to which Phoenix's life is filled with difficulty, but also with a sense of purpose. To some degree, this purpose emerges from Phoenix's love for her grandson. At the same time, Phoenix is also motivated by an internal will to persevere despite the hardship she encounters.

The fact that Phoenix describes "chains about my feet" reminds the reader that she was born before the abolition of slavery. Now, the memory of slavery haunts Phoenix and the world in which she lives, and is sometimes so strong that it has a physical effect on her. During the 1940s (as in the present), many white people were eager to dismiss slavery as something that happened a long time ago, with little bearing on the present. However, Phoenix's story highlights the way in which the legacy of slavery still has a major impact on the world, particularly in the way African Americans are still held back and oppressed by a racist society.

☞ “Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little green bush.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt Brace edition of *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* published in 1982.

Explanation and Analysis

As Phoenix walks down the hill, her dress snags against a bushel of thorns. She carefully untangles her dress while addressing the thorns, telling them they are doing their "appointed work" by not letting "folks pass." This passage highlights Phoenix's affectionate, harmonious relationship to nature, even when it causes her difficulty. Although the thorns make it hard for her to walk, Phoenix acknowledges that they are simply doing what thorns are supposed to do, an observation that points to the belief that everything in the world was created by God for a reason.

The religious overtones are emphasized by the symbolic significance of thorns within Christianity, originating in the crown of thorns Jesus was forced to wear at his crucifixion. This connection draws parallels between the hardship Phoenix must endure and the suffering of Christ. Indeed, throughout the story Phoenix exhibits the Christ-like qualities of humility, perseverance, and dignity under pressure. It is only through her humble and dignified perseverance that she is able to gradually make a path for herself, both metaphorically and in the literal sense of navigating the natural landscape.

“Now comes the trial.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has disentangled herself from the thorns, but is then faced with the additional challenge of walking along a log that has fallen over the creek at the bottom of the hill. As she prepares to walk over it, she remarks: "Now comes the trial." Once again, the story elevates Phoenix's simple interactions with the natural landscape into obstacles with a much greater significance. Phoenix's use of the word "trial" again links her experience to that of Christ, and the very fact that she is speaking aloud suggests she does not consider herself alone on her journey. Phoenix's comments also highlight the fact that she has walked on the path many times before and thus knows the challenges that lie along the way.

“Glad this not the season for bulls...and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Having successfully crossed the creek by walking over the log with her eyes closed, Phoenix pauses to rest by a tree, imagining a little boy bringing her a slice of marble cake. She then leaves the tree and has to climb under a fence, speaking "loudly" to herself as she does so and refusing to get stuck or let her dress get torn. As she continues on her way, she reflects that she is grateful it is "not the season for bulls" and that "the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep." This passage emphasizes Phoenix's strength and humility. Despite all she has endured, she is still grateful that her journey is not even more difficult, and retains a deep faith in God's power over the world around her.

“This the easy place. This the easy going.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has encountered a scarecrow, at first mistaking it for a ghost. Once she realizes her mistake, she laughs and dances with the scarecrow before continuing on her way. Then she reaches the wagon trail, which is pleasant and easier to walk over. She tells herself to "walk pretty," as this is the easy part of her route. This moment in the story highlights the idea that difficult experiences will eventually give way to happiness and ease, a notion that again has religious overtones, pointing to the concept of heaven. However, as will soon be revealed, Phoenix is mistaken in assuming that this part of her journey will be less arduous. Although the path is flat, the presence of white people turns out to be much more of a threat than the natural landscape.

“Why, that’s too far! That’s as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble.” He patted the stuffed bag he carried, and there hung down a little closed claw. It was one of the bob-whites, with its beak hooked bitterly to show it was dead. “Now you go on home, Granny!”

Related Characters: Hunter (speaker), Phoenix Jackson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has fallen into a ditch and been helped to her feet by a young white hunter. When he asks her where she’s from, she explains that she lives “away back yonder,” further than can be seen from where they are standing. The hunter replies that Phoenix has travelled “too far,” and urges her to return home. He mentions that he also travels a long way, but at least gets the spoils of hunting for his trouble. This exchange reveals how the hunter’s surface-level friendliness masks far more sinister sentiments. His use of the term “Granny” may appear familiar and affectionate, but is in fact patronizing and reveals the hunter’s sense of entitlement. This notion is confirmed by the fact that he feels able to tell Phoenix what to do.

The threatening side of the hunter’s character is also symbolized by the dead animal in his bag. The “little closed claw” and “beak hooked bitterly” reveal the violent power the hunter has over more vulnerable beings, whether animals or Phoenix herself. While the hunter may appear pleasant and kind on the surface, his presence in fact has the potential to be dominating and tyrannical. As a young white man, he has total control over the situation, including the power of life and death.

colored people” won’t miss a chance to go and “see Santa Claus.” The hunter’s comments exemplify his patronizing and demeaning attitude toward Phoenix and other black people. His claim to “know” that Phoenix is going to see Santa Claus is both mistaken and belittling, as it likens elderly black people to children. The fact that Phoenix doesn’t correct him also shows the power the hunter has over her, a power she is forced to accept. Indeed, this power is symbolized by the way that the hunter’s laughter is described as “filling the whole landscape,” emphasizing his dominance over the region.

“He ain’t scared of nobody. He a big black dog.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Hunter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

As the hunter and Phoenix are talking, she has noticed a nickel fall out of his pocket onto the ground. She attempts to distract the hunter by pointing to the dog, laughing and saying “he ain’t scared of nobody.” This effort to distract the hunter so she can steal the nickel is cunning, and reveals that Phoenix strategically uses her own vulnerability to manipulate the hunter. Although she pretends to want the hunter’s protection from the dog, in reality there is a parallel between Phoenix herself and the animal. Both “ain’t scared of nobody,” despite the very real threat that people like the hunter pose to them. This connection suggests that fear is a matter of attitude and endurance; no matter one’s vulnerability, it is always possible to choose not to be afraid.

He gave another laugh, filling the whole landscape. “I know you old colored people! Wouldn’t miss going to town to see Santa Claus!”

Related Characters: Hunter (speaker), Phoenix Jackson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Having been told by the hunter to go home, Phoenix insists that she must go into town because “the time come around.” In response, the hunter laughs and says he knows “old

Phoenix heard the dogs fighting, and heard the man running and throwing sticks. She even heard a gunshot. But she was slowly bending forward by that time, further and further forward, the lids stretched down over her eyes, as if she were doing this in her sleep. Her chin was lowered almost to her knees. The yellow palm of her hand came out from the fold of her apron. Her fingers slid down and along the ground under the piece of money with the grace and care they would have in lifting an egg from under a setting hen. Then she slowly straightened up, she stood erect, and the nickel was in her apron pocket. A bird flew by. Her lips moved. “God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Hunter

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has distracted the hunter by encouraging him to set his own dog loose on the stray black dog that made her fall into a ditch. While the dogs fight, Phoenix slowly but skillfully picks up the nickel from the ground and puts it in her pocket. As soon as this is done, she notices a bird fly by, and acknowledges that God is watching her and has seen that she has been reduced to stealing. This passage reveals the complex ways in which Phoenix is forced to navigate the world in order to survive. Her skill in distracting the hunter from the nickel suggests that it is perhaps not the first time she has stolen something, and also that she is accustomed to being watched closely.

Although Phoenix appears to feel guilty about the fact that God has seen her take the nickel, the actions of the hunter highlight the moral ambiguity of the situation. The hunter's arrogant dominance and Phoenix's frailty and poverty point to the vast injustice of the society in which they live. Meanwhile, the larger setting of the story--in the middle of a rural landscape filled with nonhuman animals--indicates that Phoenix's actions are a matter of survival more than morality. Like the plants and animals along the path, Phoenix must do what she can to get by in a treacherous world. Phoenix's statement that God is watching her "the whole time" indicates that God sees her steal, but also understands the circumstances which led her to commit this act.

☞ “No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Hunter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

The hunter has successfully scared off the dog, and when he returns he laughs and points his gun at Phoenix. She stands very still, but when the hunter asks if she's scared, she says that she isn't; she's seen plenty of guns go off "for less than what I done." Phoenix's stoic courage during this moment is

again almost Christ-like, and confirms the parallel between her and the dog who "ain't scared of nobody." Although the hunter displays his absolute power over Phoenix by pointing the gun at her, by reacting in such a dignified manner Phoenix asserts herself as the more powerful and righteous person in their exchange.

Phoenix's comment that she has seen plenty of guns go off "for less than what I done" contains multiple levels of meaning. It is possible that Phoenix thinks that the hunter has seen her steal the money, and is thus commenting that she has seen black people killed for stealing less than a nickel. However, her statement can also be interpreted more broadly. During the Jim Crow era, the legal system and culture of the South conspired to criminalize black people simply for existing, and black people were regularly violently attacked and killed for doing nothing at all. Phoenix is evidently accustomed to this kind of undeserved, hateful violence, which helps explain her (seemingly) casual reaction to the hunter's gun.

☞ “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.”

Related Characters: Hunter (speaker), Phoenix Jackson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Impressed by Phoenix's calm reaction to the gun being pointed at her, the hunter has commented that she must be a hundred years old and afraid of nothing. He claims he would give her money if he had some, a statement that the hunter intends to be a lie but is in fact, unbeknownst to him, the truth. Although he doesn't know it, the hunter *has* given Phoenix money--the nickel she stole after it fell from his pocket. This strange convergence of truth and lies highlights the complexity of relations between white and black people in the Jim Crow South, indicating that nothing is what it seems.

Having violently frightened Phoenix, the hunter pretends to be generous and compassionate; yet both Phoenix and the reader know he is lying about not having any money. Moreover, the hunter's "advice" that Phoenix stay home might at first sound well-intentioned, but the broader context of their encounter reveals this to be a threat. Both

characters have acknowledged that Phoenix could be killed simply for walking along the path into town. By encouraging her to stay at home, the hunter is effectively warning her not to challenge the violent system of white supremacy that governs Phoenix's life.

☞ "See my shoe," said Phoenix. "Do all right for out in the country, but wouldn't look right to go in a big building." "Stand still then, Grandma," said the lady. She put her packages down on the sidewalk beside her and laced and tied both shoes tightly.

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Woman

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has arrived in the town, which is decorated for Christmas. She encounters a lady carrying presents who smells like "the red roses in hot summer," and Phoenix asks her to please tie up her shoe. In this passage, Phoenix explains that her untied shoes "do all right for out in the country," but now that she is in town she needs them to be done up. This scene provides another interesting twist in the depiction of race and class relations. Although the lady's race is not specified, she is probably white and certainly more affluent than Phoenix, as evidenced by the fact that she is wearing perfume and carrying an armful of wrapped presents.

Despite the imbalance in their racial and class backgrounds, Phoenix does not hesitate in asking the woman to tie her shoe, again revealing her fearlessness and commitment to her own dignity. The reversal in the power relations between the two women recalls Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Jesus, or Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, although in the latter instance it would be not Phoenix who represents Jesus, but the unnamed lady. However, unlike Phoenix, the lady does not exhibit Christlike patience and humility, but rather brusquely instructs: "Stand still then, Grandma."

☞ She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall 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.

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has arrived at the doctor's office, where she encounters a document (probably the doctor's diploma) with a gold seal in a gold frame "which matched the dream that was hung up in her head." This detail provides both a sobering and uplifting perspective on Phoenix's life. On one level, it is a tragic example of all the opportunities that have not been available to Phoenix. The fact that Phoenix's "dream" is described in such lyrical terms—especially in the midst of a rather straightforward narrative—emphasizes the power of Phoenix's hope and imagination. At the same time, this passage may also refer to Phoenix's memory of the doctor's office and highlight the impressive fact that it is Phoenix's excellent memory that allows her to navigate the trip to town in spite of her poor eyesight.

☞ "Here I be," she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body.

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Having arrived in town and stepped into the doctor's office, Phoenix proudly announces, "Here I be." The "fixed and ceremonial stiffness" with which she stands emphasizes that this is a moment of triumph for Phoenix. Despite being a seemingly ordinary errand, Phoenix's journey into town for her grandson's medicine is elevated in the story to the status of a treacherous, heroic journey. Although no one at the doctor's office acknowledges her triumph, this seems to matter little to Phoenix, who takes it upon herself to quietly assert the significance of the moment.

Phoenix's words in particular highlight how meaningful her actions are, especially for an old black woman in the Jim Crow South. As the encounter with the hunter revealed, Phoenix's very existence (let alone her fearlessness, perseverance, and dignity) is radical, given the time and place in which she lives. By announcing "Here I be," Phoenix subtly acknowledges and honors the importance of her own

existence.

☝ “We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don’t seem to put him back at all...He going to last...I could tell him from all the others in creation.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Grandson

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

The nurse has explained to the attendant that Phoenix comes to get medicine for her grandson, who swallowed lye when he was young and still suffers immensely as a result. While the nurse seems pessimistic about the boy's health, Phoenix speaks about him with a deep sense of faith and love. It is clear from Phoenix's words that her grandson represents not just one individual case, but the whole future of black people in America. Whereas the nurse's view points to the immense difficulty and hardship that Phoenix's grandson experiences, Phoenix remains convinced that there is something special about her grandson that will ensure he endures ("He going to last").

Indeed, the character of the grandson can be seen as embodying the symbol of the phoenix, a view emphasized by Phoenix's comment that he sits at home in a quilt "holding his mouth open like a little bird." Through his misfortune and illness, the grandson exists in a state near to death; however, his grandmother maintains that, like the phoenix, he will ultimately survive and flourish.

☝ “This is what come to me to do...I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world.”

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson (speaker), Grandson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has received the medicine and the attendant has offered her a nickel, an act of charity in keeping with the Christmas season. Phoenix accepts the money and resolves to buy her grandson a paper windmill, reflecting that he won't be able to "believe there such a thing in the world." Phoenix's plan reveals her selflessness and generosity, and undercuts any suspicions the reader might have developed (particular during the hunter's nickel scene) that Phoenix was partly out for her own material gain. Not only her decision to buy the windmill, but the entire trip to town in the first place has been in service only of her grandson. Despite her absolute poverty, she never considers putting herself above him. Phoenix's anticipation at her grandson's shock upon receiving the windmill is similarly moving, highlighting the scarcity of their lives by claiming that such a simple, fragile object will bring him such intense joy.

☝ She lifted her free hand, gave a little nod, turned around...Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down.

Related Characters: Phoenix Jackson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Phoenix has resolved to buy her grandson a paper windmill, announcing that she will hold it in her hand for him to see as she returns home. In the final sentences of the novel, she lifts her "free hand" to indicate this plan, and slowly begins her walk to buy the windmill and, ultimately, to return home. The ending of the story, rather than bringing any firm resolution, emphasizes the perpetual struggle of Phoenix's life. Having finally completed the long, arduous trip into town, only moments later Phoenix is faced by the prospect of journeying home again. However, by raising "her free hand," Phoenix demonstrates her ability to overcome this hardship and retain the ability to remain dignified, courageous, and free.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A WORN PATH

In December a very old black woman walks slowly through a pine forest. Her name is Phoenix Jackson. She wears a red rag tied around her head, her shoes are unlaced, and her face has “numberless branching wrinkles”. Old and frail, she carries a cane, which she switches at animals she thinks she hears moving in the brush. She does not want them to derail her as she has “a long way” to go. Phoenix continues down the long undulating **path**. She looks back at where she has come from, thinking about how hard the journey always is for her, how “something always...pleads I should stay”.

Phoenix’s skirt gets tangled in a bush, and she carefully removes herself so that the fabric doesn’t rip, her fingers, “quick and intent”. But each time she succeeds another part of her dress gets caught. She refuses to let the thorns rip up her skirt, but she understands that they’re “doing [their] appointed work.” Coming to a river with only a log for a bridge, Phoenix proclaims, “Now comes the trial.” She crosses it successfully with her eyes closed, which proves to her that she isn’t as frail as might be thought.

Sitting down to rest by a tree, Phoenix imagines a boy handing her a piece of cake, though she gets up quickly after realizing this is only a reverie. Somewhat further on, she must pass through a barbed wire fence, and she is again careful about her dress. Seeing a buzzard, she asks it aloud what it is watching, and is glad that God made it so that snakes and other dangerous creatures are not out at this time of year.

Going through a field, Phoenix sees something “tall, black, and skinny”, which she mistakes for a “dancing” ghost. Only when she touches it does she realize it is not a real man. Speaking aloud, she wonders at her age and on her loss of sense, saying she “should be shut up for good”. She commands the **scarecrow** to dance “while I dancing with you,” then, shaking her head slightly, continues walking.

Phoenix’s age and poverty are emphasized through the description of her wrinkles, her cane, and the state of her shoes. The cane both aids her physical deficiencies and acts as a rather ineffectual weapon against the natural dangers/nuisances she knows she might encounter in her journey along the rural path. The difficulty of her as yet unexplained journey is made clear in the way something—her body, her mind – pleads that she stop. Her perseverance is communicated in the simple fact that she doesn’t.



The trials and obstacles of the journey, which Phoenix recognizes as such, reflect the sometimes random and unfair travails of her life. The thorns allude to the crown of thorns around Jesus’ head. Yet Phoenix possesses a wry sense of humor and, like Christ, accepts her obstacles as part of life. Closing her eyes at the bridge underscores her faith in a higher being who will watch and protect her, as well as her own memory or inner strength over her outward senses and abilities.



Her reverie of the boy establishes Phoenix’s tendency to drift off. The reverie also suggests how her life might have looked had she and her family lived an easier life – a boy bringing her, in her old age, cake. Though a dreamer, she is also a determined realist, tending to her obstacles one at a time, and never deviating from her path. Note how she feels free to commune with nature, and how she is grateful to God for whatever small blessings are afforded her.



The scarecrow seems at first like it might be a lynched black man, a sudden intrusion of the social violence that faces black people in the South upon what had up until now seemed just a trial of Phoenix against nature. Phoenix dancing with this “ghost” suggests her deep and inherited connection to this history, as well as a kind of celebration on her part that the scarecrow is not, in fact, something worse than that.



Coming to the wagon track, she assumes the journey will be easier. She happens upon an old well of unknown origins—unknown because it existed from before her birth. Not long after, a black dog with a “lolling tongue” suddenly appears and she is unprepared and manages to hit it only once with her cane before falling into a ditch. She scolds herself lightly for getting into this situation and allowing a dog, which is now sitting on his tail and “smiling” at her, to “stall” her. She tries to reach up and, finding no one, just waits.

A white hunter, a young man, soon comes along, with a dog on a chain. He laughingly asks Phoenix, whom he calls “Granny,” what she’s doing in the ditch, before lifting her out. While the two dogs growl at each other, he good-naturedly but condescendingly asks Phoenix whether she’s hurt and about where she lives and where she’s going. When she explains that she’s not going home, but to town, he exclaims that that’s the distance he walks when he comes out to hunt. He then indicates the birds he’s shot and says, but at least “I get something for my trouble.” She insists on going to town, and he laughs that “I know you old colored people...wouldn’t miss going to town to see Santa Claus!”

Phoenix does not correct the hunter’s lack of understanding, and in fact keeps very still, because she’s noticed that a nickel has fallen out of his pocket. When he asks how old she is, Phoenix responds that there is “no telling”. Then, changing the subjects, she laughs at the other dog because, being “a big black dog”, he isn’t “scared of nobody.” The challenge compels the hunter to get rid of the dog by chasing after it with his own dog. As the hunter does that, Phoenix, very slowly and with “grace and care”, reaches down and carefully picks up the nickel and puts it in her apron pocket. She notices a bird fly overhead, admits that she’s “come to stealing,” and remarks that God’s been watching her the whole time.

The hunter comes back after scaring off the dog, and, laughing, points the gun at Phoenix and asks her if she’s scared. She stands completely still, but tells him that she’s seen many guns go off much closer to her than his is, and for less reason “than what I done”. The hunter claims that he would give her money if he had any with him, and tells her again to stay home so that nothing happens to her. As they part ways, she hears his gun going off repeatedly in the distance.

Phoenix thinks, understandably, that as the road itself gets easier the journey will be easier, but as it turns out as she moves deeper into the more populated areas of Mississippi things get more difficult. She stands up to the dog, and even when she fails she accepts her fate. Reaching up her hand for help when no one is there could be taken for a sign of delusion, but it might also be taken as a sign of faith. She does not lose her cool and is clear-eyed about her situation.



The hunter at first seems like a kind savior who has appeared in a lucky miracle, but he turns out to be a more complicated figure. His initial questions about Phoenix’s home and journey suggest that he arrogantly thinks it’s his right to know these things (notice that she doesn’t ask him any such questions). His disbelief that she would walk as far as he can demeans her based on her age. And his comments that she’ll get no benefit from her trip and assumption that she’s just going to see Santa Claus show how his prejudices about her race make him believe her journey is not only less important than his but is, in fact, totally frivolous and based on superficial religious superstition.



Phoenix outwits the white hunter by cleverly using his pride and feelings of racial superiority over blacks (both herself and the dog) against him, and she manages to steal a nickel with remarkable grace. The nickel’s importance to her testifies to her poverty, while the guilt she feels afterward shows her conscience and deep religious feeling (though the fact that she steals the nickel might, at this point, raise questions in some reader’s minds about her character or motives).



Perhaps amped up on his “success” in proving his and his dog’s strength over the black dog, the hunter does not stop there and feels the need to also assert his power over Phoenix, an old and defenseless black lady. Phoenix alludes directly to white violence against innocent blacks, but the hunter barely seems to notice—it doesn’t seem important to him that she’s seen innocents killed. Instead he tells her to keep to her place in society—in her rural home. He then lies about not having any money – his lost nickel proves that he did at least have that. Phoenix’s earlier comment about God watching the whole time gains some resonance here. Is God watching the hunter as he threatens and lies, too?



Reaching Natchez, Phoenix hears the bells ringing. It is Christmastime and she is disoriented by the lights, but she pays little attention to what she sees and instead “depended on her feet” to know the way.

Rather than the city being a place of comfort for Phoenix, it is a place of disorientation. Yet Phoenix is guided by instinct borne over many trips to make it to her destination. She has worn a path through the city.



A woman carrying a number of presents in her hands walks by and Phoenix stops her to ask her if she will tie her shoes for her, telling the woman that unlaced shoes are “right for out in the country” but not in the “big building” she is going to. The woman, who is a bit gruff, tells her to “stand still then”, but does tie Phoenix’s shoes. Phoenix thanks the woman and says that she “doesn’t mind asking” for someone to tie her shoe.

Phoenix is aware that country clothes are inappropriate in the city. The woman carrying presents again contrasts to Phoenix’s own poverty. The image of the woman tying Phoenix’s shoes echoes Mary Magdalene washing Christ’s feet. Yet the (almost certainly white) woman acts not with pure generosity, but rather with a kind of arrogant gruffness, ordering Phoenix to “stand still then.” Phoenix, though, seems not to register the woman’s implied sense of superiority. Phoenix’s own dignity outweighs the slight in the other woman’s gruffness.



Phoenix enters the big building and climbs up flights of stairs until her feet tell her where to stop. She enters a room and sees a document with a gold seal in a gold frame. The document “matched the dream that was hung up in her head”. “Here I be,” Phoenix says.

Once again Phoenix’s body knows where it ‘s going—it’s as if she’s “worn” this path into her bones. The document is a diploma. That it matches her “dream” suggests two things: that she treasures the knowledge it implies as something that can help her; but also that she treasures that knowledge, which she never had the chance to attain, for its own sake and as a possibility for her descendants. “Here I be” is an assertion of her success in making this difficult journey, and more broadly her right to be there.



An attendant sitting at a reception desk immediately pegs her as “a charity case”. The attendant questions Phoenix for details regarding why she’s come with increasing frustration and condescension, but Phoenix does not respond to her. Finally a nurse comes out and, with a bit more kindness, identifies her as “old Aunt Phoenix” who comes “as regular as clockwork” to pick up her grandson’s medication—he swallowed lye a few years ago, which damaged his throat—and offers her a seat. The nurse repeatedly asks her how her grandson is doing, but Phoenix remains silent, until finally the nurse grows exasperated and scolds Phoenix for “taking up “ their time, and asks if her grandson is dead. At this Phoenix comes back to herself and explains that she had forgotten why she had made her trip. As if excusing herself, she says that her memory failed her and mentions that she was “too old at the Surrender” to ever get an education.

Yet Phoenix is immediately, and once again, accosted by a condescending figure of white authority. Even the more understanding nurse gets frustrated with her, and the nurse’s comment about Phoenix taking up their time indicates her sense of her own importance relative to Phoenix’s. The nurse’s comments also finally reveal to the reader what has been withheld: Phoenix’s motivation for her journey. Phoenix’s silence is at first perplexing, but her explanation suggests that it’s a product of her total exhaustion—this journey was profoundly difficult for her. And now it’s clear why she made such a difficult journey: for love of her grandson.



The nurse, speaking loudly and slowly, suggests that the grandson will never heal. Phoenix, however, says the boy's suffering never holds him down and states that he is "going to last". Though she has momentarily seemed to forget him, she vows not to do so again, and says that "I could tell him from all the others in creation."

The nurse is both condescending in the way she talks and blunt in her assessment of the boy's future. Yet Phoenix is optimistic and talks about her grandson in terms of perseverance – he is "going to last." Phoenix's assertion of her grandson's primacy in God's existence suggests her feeling of her own and her grandson's self-worth as individuals.



After this the nurse reveals that the doctor has said that as long as Phoenix can come get it, he will provide the medicine as charity. The nurse brings out the medicine, and marks "Charity" on a form. The attendant, noting that it's Christmastime, asks if she can give Phoenix a few pennies, despite her earlier condescension. Phoenix answers by saying "five pennies is a nickel". She takes the coin without hesitation, if carefully.

The free medicine exists both as charity and imposition, showing the city to be a place of nominal caring but also a place of harshness and practicality. She can have the medicine for free, but no one's going to go to the effort to bring it to her. The attendant's charity must also be seen in concert with her earlier rudeness – she seems to be giving because that's what you do at Christmas, not because she cares. Phoenix has enough dignity to both name the terms of the amount, and to accept the charity without self-denigration.



Phoenix puts both her coins next to each other in her palm, taps her cane on the floor, and declares that she is going to buy a **paper windmill** for her grandson, that "he will find it hard to believe there is such a thing in the world". She says, "This is what I come to do." Lifting her "free hand", she walks out of the office and goes down the steps slowly.

The cane's tap announces Phoenix's newfound if minimal economic power, and she suddenly revises, or perhaps augments, the aim of her journey, though still in the name of her love. She will purchase for her grandson something that will show her love for him and broaden his world, make him see what's possible. The gift is something that harnesses nature into both energy and beauty—it is something that represents hope, that maybe, just maybe, will help spur her grandson to push on and extend the worn path a little farther. These are just Phoenix's hopes and dreams, of course, and given her grandson's injury they are as fragile as the paper windmill, but now it is clear that these dreams are what fueled her journey and her dignity, are what drives her to keep wearing down her path. And she has traveled extremely far: Phoenix was born a slave, after all, but now as she heads back home she is lifting her "free hand."





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