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Major Essay #1

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1682 (1275 w/o quotes)

Two Parallel Paths

The short story *A Worn Path* by Eudora Welty illustrates the journey of an old feeble woman through dangerous terrain in order to get to town and receive charity medicine for her sick young grandson. The short story is rich with symbolisms and metaphors and a reader has many possible themes to extract from it. Although *A Worn Path* contains many symbols to interpret, this essay will concentrate on a form of comparison through a formalist approach to criticism. The focus will lie on a single, general, metaphoric concept that is presented in the literature and its comparison with a popular biblical teaching; namely Christianity. Phoenix Jackson, during her journey to town, symbolizes the walk of life that Christian believers go through as interpreted through biblical understanding and practice.

The first evident comparison that meets the eye is the constant referral to a long journey. In the first page of the story Phoenix Jackson says, “Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons...I got a long way” (Welty 1). Later in the story, when Old Phoenix meets with a young white male hunter, the man comments about her destination, “Why, that’s too far! That’s as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble” (Welty 3). Even later, when Aunt Phoenix finally gets to town, the nurse addresses her, “why don’t you just

take a seat? We won't keep you standing after your long trip" (Welty 4). With repeated confirmation from the hunter and the nurse, it really is "a long way" to town.

The concept of "a long way" is easily compared with all sorts of biblical principles. Neil D. Isaacs, a published critic, consistently compares *A Worn Path* to a religious pilgrimage. In biblical text there are numerous examples of long journeys which, symbolically interpreted, compare in both hardships and rewards. There is the journey of Abraham into the land of Canaan; the journey of Moses out of Egypt; the journey of Israel from Babylon. Jesus in the book of Mark sent his disciples on a journey "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two...for the journey" (Mark 6:7-8). Starting from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the entire bible encompasses the call of a long journey/pilgrimage and similarly with *A Worn Path* shares both difficulties and rewards (Isaacs 75-81).

While the previous paragraph discussed the literal similarities between biblical text and *A Worn Path*, a long journey can also be interpreted with a spiritual concept. If we examine the story of Israel and the journey they took across the desert to make it into the Promised Land the real biblical significance of that story comes from its relation to human life. Israel had to go through many troubles and trials; wandering the desert for forty years before they were finally able to go to the land flowing with milk and honey. In modern times, this journey symbolizes all the troubles and trials that humans experience before reaching a desired destination. It symbolizes the walk of life through evil and temptations until entrance into the glory of heaven.

Another biblical comparison that can be made with *A Worn Path* is the specific trials and hardships that Old Phoenix went through before reaching the town. One striking example that stands out is the invisible forces that try to stop poor Aunt Phoenix from making her journey. When she was going up the hill she said "Seem like there is chains about my feet, time I get this

far” (Welty 1). When she gets to the top of the hill she says “Something always take a hold of me on this hill— pleads I should stay” (Welty 1). Paying attention to the words “seem like” and “something” it is evident that the subject she is referring to is abstract. There are no chains on her feet, but it is very understandable why it can feel like or seem like there is. Logically speaking there is nothing on top of that hill that tells or “pleads” her to stay, but it is reasonably believable that there may be something speculative that is attempting to hold her back. In the bible it says,

“For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it... I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.” (Romans 7:19-21)

These verses explain the spiritual battle inside a person. There are good things a person may want to do, but something always tries to prevent them from doing it. Old Phoenix wants to get to town, but there are things that are holding her back from the inside. Same with every other biblical believer who wants to live a good and sinless life; inside their body is an abstract hypothetical force that tries to corrupt them. On the hill something tells Phoenix Jackson to stay and Welty uses a good figurative word to describe it; “pleads”. According to biblical understanding, the fleshly body always “pleads” with the righteous spirit to succumb to temptation.

Despite facing inward temptations and hardships, there are also exterior elements that try to hinder Aunt Phoenix. The thorn bush is a wonderful example. “‘I in the thorny bush,’ she said. ‘Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes

thought you was a pretty little green bush” (Welty 1). The little green bush appeared harmless but then proved to be destructive. The bible says “Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake, and poisons like a viper” (Proverbs 23:31). Another metaphor of how something can appear attractive and harmless but in reality it’s dangerous.

The idea of purity is also compared. When Old Phoenix was caught the author writes “It was not possible to allow the dress to tear.” The statement “not possible” is a very strong declaration and it applies to biblical teachings as well. In Revelations it says “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). This text does not literally refer to clean clothes, but refers to the purity of the spirit. Old Phoenix could not let the dress rip; it was “not possible”. In biblical interpretation a believer can’t soil his clothing, can’t defile his righteousness and integrity because that would mean denial into heaven, denial to walk with God. It’s written “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person...has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:5). In other words, anyone with defiled clothing will not enter heaven.

One thing that should be mentioned is the aspect of faith that *A Worn Path* reflects. When brave Phoenix Jackson finally made it down the hill and out of the thorn bush, she stood in front of a mocking creek and said “Now comes the trial” (Welty 1). The focus point of how she overcomes her trial is trivial, (for this particular analysis anyhow) but what’s significant is that she closes her eyes and steps forward. In a more concrete comparison it is symbolically a leap of faith. Faith is the founding cornerstone in biblical practice, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). Without faith you can never succeed when you are face with “the

trial”. Apostle Paul addressed the Thessalonian Church during a time of hardship, “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring” (1 Thess. 1:4). Just as Old Aunt Phoenix closed her eyes and went forward through her trial, so do many believers go forward with sole faith on God.

One last thing to compare is the free gift of medicine at the end. Phoenix Jackson made it to town and got the medicine for free. Similarly in Christianity salvation is free. It’s written “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Just like Phoenix received a free gift of medicine, so do believers in the bible receive the free gift of grace from God.

Although it’s unknown whether or not Eudora Welty meant to parallel a biblical walk of life in her short story *A Worn Path*, analyzing the story from such a comparison does yield good fruit. From the start of the long journey and through every small little blunder with the thorn bush, the creek and the log, the black dog, the hunter, the nickel, etc... a comparison can be made with a religious walk of life. Although this essay was unable to address important points such as the black dog who delayed Old Phoenix, the nickel that she stole while God was watching her, hopefully it appropriately illustrated the connection between Old Phoenix Jackson and biblical teachings. There is a clearly visible and very strong parallel that connects the world of *A Worn Path* and the world of a Christian.

Works Cited

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