

A character study: phoenix jackson essay

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Phoenix Jackson, the main character of “ A Word Path”, by Eudora Welty, is a determined and giving Negro woman, who, despite her old age and fading independence, frequently makes a long and hard journey to town to help her grandson. The whole story takes place in about a day’s time — yet this small glimpse into her long life is enough time for the author to convey to the reader who exactly this character is, both physically and psychologically. Physically, she is a frail, old woman. She wears a red rag over her head, and carries a thin, small cane, which is fashioned from an umbrella. With her blue eyes, she walks toward town in her long, darkly striped dress with an apron of equal length.

Her skin is full of “ numberless branching wrinkles”. She lives about a day’s walk from a town called Natchez in Mississippi, in the early 1900’s. Her unfortunate time of birth lead to one of her most prominent characteristics, which is her lack of education – although one must keep in mind that she more than makes of for her lack of education through her knowledge of age, and her steadfastness.

She was born in a time where her teens would be stolen by the American Civil War, and, at the time of the surrender, she was already too old to attend school. This would make her nearly 100 years old. It is evident by the context of the story, and by the way that the white man that she meets treats her, that she is an ex-slave. Throughout the story, there are constant descriptive metaphors of things that are black, which represent Phoenix. For example, “ Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field”. Of all the metaphors the author could have used, she chose one with the words black; withered; one arm;

cotton field. This shows the harsh times that Phoenix had to go through to become who she is today.

The fact that the ‘black men’ have one arm conveys the idea of hardship, along with the withered cotton fields. Also contributing, is that fact that this statement is presented after Phoenix overcomes the obstacle of the fence and is assumed safe. This is the goodness of her soul against her bad environment. The other metaphor used, is when Phoenix says “He ain’t cared of nobody. He a big black dog”. This is showing the strength of her people. The fact that both of these metaphors are opposites, presents a kind of duality between her strengths of character and weaknesses of environment. Quite briefly, this story is about a loving old woman who is fetching medicine for her grandson, who is ill because he had swallowed lye a few years earlier.

Phoenix is the protagonist of the story – in other words, she is at the center of the story, and is constantly confronted with obstacles which she must overcome in order to succeed on her journey. One can say that there are two antagonists: the world in which she lives, in that she is most likely oppressed for her skin colour, and for providing obstacles such as dishes and thorny bushes, and secondly herself, for not having the youthful strength to overcome these obstacles. One would initially believe that the young hunter is, too, an antagonist, however, upon closer analysis; he does not oppose her at all nor provide any obstacles.

In fact, if anything he helps her. He helps her in two ways – firstly, by helping her up from the ditch, and, secondly, stimulating a strong portrayal of

character in Phoenix. Although she is challenged by him as he raises his gun to her face, she does not see it as an obstacle, and thus he does not provide any obstacles for her to overcome and is not to be considered an antagonist. This chronological story is told from the view of an omniscient narrator. This sheds light on the character of Phoenix (opposed to the plot, which is not the main focus), because if the narration was first-person, for example, the reader would probably not be able to make much sense of the story – let alone the character – because often Phoenix is confused or has temporarily lost her memory, or is talking to herself. With the third person perspective, one can understand her instead of just assuming that she's insane or senile for talking to herself and even to animals and scarecrows. One can tell a lot about a person's character just by the way they walk. Old Phoenix walked “(..) a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum (...)” The key idea there is that of the balanced heaviness and lightness.

That is the perfect metaphor for Phoenix Jackson. She is heavy. She is light. She steals. She gives. Her love for her grandson is what keeps her going.

Every few seasons she makes this trip. For such a diminishing old lady, it is quite the feat, although she manages because she is determined, but not stubborn. She knows when she needs help, for example, when she asks the lady to tie her shoes for her.

Another way she gets help is to steal – and although this was her first time, as illustrated by her saying “ God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing”, — she did it nonetheless. It is about half way through the story

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that we understand that her rigidness comes from experience. When asked if the gun scares her, she replies “ No Sir, I seen plenty go off closer in my days, and for less than what I done”. She has been shaped by her world.

Her determination; her will to give; her heart; her good spirit and her toughness are all direct products of the world she has endured. In conclusion, it is evident that despite her environmental influence, she was a strong person from the start because she grew from her experiences instead of crumbling under the pressure. This is the theme that the story lends to the reader: One must be strong and overcome life’s challenges.