

Redemption from slavery: a worn path

Literature



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The plot and setting of *A Worn Path* depict the arduous journey of black slaves toward redemption from slavery. The exposition focuses on the character of Phoenix Jackson, who represents black slaves. The complication of the plot is the struggle of Phoenix against herself and her environment. First, she is already old, even too old for her journey, which she admits: “ I the oldest people I ever know” (Welty, 1941, par. 25). She cannot even properly see where she is heading, yet she relies on her poor eyesight and memory to arrive at her destination. Her age stands for the length of time of the slave's struggle for freedom; she can no longer tell how long anymore. Her physical degradation, furthermore, represents the physical consequences of slavery. Second, Phoenix also struggles with her surroundings or society. The setting presents diverse obstacles to freedom. The “ foxes, owls, beetles, jackrabbits, coons and wild animals” in her way represent all the kinds of people, whites and blacks alike, who oppose the slave's pursuit of freedom. The thorny bush is also an example of what the black race needed to endure in their “ endless struggle” (Sykes, 1998, p. 151). The climax occurs when it seems that Phoenix has forgotten the purpose of her journey. This “ forgetting” is a form of situational irony, where it would have been a great waste of time and effort if Phoenix could not achieve her mission. This “ forgetting” can also be paralleled to the passivity in the blacks “ waiting” for their freedom. In a way, waiting patiently for their freedom also evokes a lackadaisical response from the whites. Situational irony takes place once more; the more patient the blacks were, the more the whites exploited them. The resolution of the plot takes place when Phoenix remembers her gift to her grandson, the paper windmill. This “ gift” stands for the gift of freedom from the white people, which has implications that will

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be discussed later on. The ending is ominous: “ Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down” (Welty, 1941, par. 99). The gift does not lead to upward mobility, but to a decline. That it is a slow decline makes the descent more painful. The descent stresses that blacks were still a long way from freedom.

Phoenix Jackson possesses distinctive motivation in arriving at her destination, which represents freedom from slavery. In her trail, numerous obstacles exist, such as the “ log ... across the creek” (Welty, 1941, par. 9). She struggles to “ march” (Welty, 1941, par. 11) across. This march entails her consistency in her efforts, which no hindrance can stop. Phoenix shows “ dominant and persistent motivation” (Moberly, 2006, p. 110) to express the determination of her race to be free. Like her, blacks also continuously struggled toward their freedom. Her name alone, Phoenix, stands for renewal. It does not matter how often the slaves stumble and fall, they will always renew their dedication to their freedom. In addition, Phoenix has distinct kindness, which flows from her “ deep-grained habit of love” (Heller, 2004, p. 1). Her kindness reflects the religiosity of black slaves. They were oftentimes willing to redeem themselves through peaceful means.

Welty uses symbolism to express the short-term responses to the blacks call for freedom and racial equality through the medicine and paper windmill, while symbols of death represent the sacrifices that the black people endured to attain their fervent aspirations of freedom. The medicine represents temporary answers to the plight of the slaves. It only “ soothes” (Welty, 1941, par. 98) the throat of the grandson, in the same way, that whites made promises of freedom that also soothed the demands of the slaves. The paper windmill is a symbol of the initial form of freedom from

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white people. This gift is like paper, frail, and easily broken. The Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves, but many white people, particularly in the South, continued to have slaves and treated blacks as slaves. In addition, the difficulty of being redeemed from slavery resulted in bloodshed and so death symbols are scattered in the story. Phoenix sees a “buzzard” or vulture, the symbol of death. It is waiting for her, as if it knows that her journey will soon be futile, in the same way, that the struggles toward freedom seemed to be senseless too, because of too many obstacles. The “big dead trees” (Welty, 1941, par. 16) and “field of dead corn” (Welty, 1941, par. 20) can be viewed as the many slaves who sacrificed their lives during slavery and while pursuing freedom. Hence, Welty is saying that redemption had been a story of the struggle for black people.

Phoenix goes through difficult lengths to attain her grandson's medicine and paper windmill, which resembles the black people's journey of redemption from slavery, as well as their journey toward freedom. Welty used numerous symbols to further assert the theme of redemption from slavery, which death cannot hinder. Furthermore, white people increased the difficulty of the journey by offering frail, fleeting forms of freedom. Amidst all these hindrances and superficial gifts, for Phoenix and her race, the worn path is worth enduring, because the destination is freedom. Thus, the main goal is to achieve freedom sometime in the future, where the slave Phoenix Jackson no longer exists.