

THE USE OF SYMBOLISM IN EUDORA WELTY'S "A WORN PATH"

Soliyeva Zuhra

BuxDPI talabasi

E-mail: soliyevazuhra327@gmail.com

Abstract: *In the first half of the 20th century, many writers employed symbolic representation of their characters to convey complex ideas. This article provides a brief overview of symbolism as a literary device and analyzes how the renowned Mississippi author Eudora Welty employs this technique in her short story "A Worn Path." The reveals focuses on the key symbolic elements within the story and examines their artistic and thematic significance in depth.*

Key words: *legendary bird, symbolism, female protagonist, metaphor in literature, symbolic journey, representation of women*

Eudora Welty, born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi, is widely regarded as one of the most influential voices in 20th-century American literature. Her writing is deeply rooted in the culture and everyday realities of the American South, particularly the Mississippi region where she lived most of her life. Welty's stories are known for their richly detailed settings, realistic characters and symbolic depth, often portraying the complexity of Southern life through subtle yet powerful imagery.

Her first published short story collection, "A Curtain of Green" (1941), introduced readers to her unique narrative voice and her keen observation of human behavior. Many of her works center on female protagonists, through whom she explored themes such as resilience, social limitations, and the quiet strength of women in patriarchal environments.

In addition, her works often engage with social issues such as race, gender and class, not through overt commentary but through richly symbolic storytelling. One of her most iconic stories, "A Worn Path", reflects these themes by portraying the physical and symbolic journey of an elderly African American woman, Phoenix Jackson.

In this research, I will analyze how Welty uses symbolism in "A Worn Path" to represent social struggles, female strength and the cultural landscape of the American South during her time.

Symbolism as a literary technique emerged in late 19th-century France, primarily through the works of poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. It was a reaction against realism and naturalism, favoring a more abstract,

emotional and suggestive expression of reality. Symbolist writers believed that truth could only be represented indirectly through metaphors, symbols and images that evoke the essence of the subject rather than its surface.

During that period, numerous authors preferred to convey their messages indirectly through symbolic representations rather than explicit narration. One prominent example is Eudora Welty, a distinguished female writer who developed her literary career in the state of Mississippi, the South of America. Her contemporaries wrote various opinions about the writer. For instance, Katherine Anne Porter highlighted Welty's sharp perception of human nature: "Her perception of human nature is sharp, shrewd, and true. Welty has a remarkable ability to capture emotional depth with precision and simplicity"¹¹. Similarly, Marianne Hauser, in her review in *The New York Times*, commented on Welty's ability to convey powerful images with minimal words: "With just a few lines, she depicts a deaf-mute's gesture, the windblown skirts of a Negro woman in the fields, or a child's confusion in an asylum conveying more than some authors manage in six hundred pages"¹². Eudora Welty's works may be quite complex, but they are true to life.

Eudora Welty, in particular, incorporated symbolism to deepen the psychological and emotional dimensions of her stories. In her short story "A Worn Path" the protagonist's journey is not merely physical; it is highly symbolic of struggle, resilience and dedication. The use of symbolic elements in this story aligns with the broader literary practices of her time and demonstrates Welty's ability to connect personal narratives with universal human experiences through symbolic storytelling.

Regarding her literary style, John W. Aldridge also stated the following: "The trouble with Eudora Welty is that she is a Southerner, a woman, and she can twang your heartstrings like a Union Grove fiddler. The consequence is that she is dismissed or accepted, according to your point of view, as a regionalist whose view does not extend beyond the first hill, as a 'woman's writer,' and as a teller of simple, sentimental tales, some of them vaguely elusive but all of them quite within the mental reach of the Wednesday Lecture Club"¹³.

"A Worn Path" was written in 1941 and was first published in that same year in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Subsequently, the story was included in the short story

¹¹ Porter, K. A. (1941). Introduction. In E. Welty, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (pp. vii–xi). New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

¹² Hauser, M. (1941, November 9). Books of the Times. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>

¹³ Aldridge, J. W. (1970). Eudora Welty: Metamorphosis of a Southern Lady Writer. *Saturday Review*, 11 April, pp. 21–23.

collection titled "A Curtain of Green", which was Eudora Welty's first published collection of short stories.

Although "A Worn Path" is among Eudora Welty's most well-known works, her literary legacies extend far beyond this single story, including a wide range of genres and styles. Renowned for her exceptional narrative skill, Welty masterfully employed symbolic imagery grounded in vivid and precise detail. Her literary works often offer a profound exploration of life in the American South, reflecting the cultural, social and psychological landscapes of the region. Furthermore, through symbolism, Welty was able to subtly critique the societal attitudes toward women and highlight the complexities of women's roles within the family and community during her time. In this analysis, particular attention will be given to the symbolic representation of the female protagonist in "A Worn Path", examining how Welty constructs her character to reflect resilience, dignity and the broader struggles faced by women of the period.

The protagonist, an elderly African American woman named Phoenix Jackson, sets out on a journey that, while simple on the surface, carries deep symbolic meaning reflecting themes such as endurance, racial injustice and unconditional love.

And why the woman is called the Protagonist? In literary analysis, the term protagonist refers to the central character around whom the narrative is constructed. In Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path", Phoenix Jackson occupies this role because the entire plot revolves around her physical and symbolic journey. The story begins and ends with Phoenix and readers experience the world through her perspective. As literary critic Michael Kreyling states, "Phoenix is the moral and emotional center of the story; all thematic elements — love, sacrifice, aging and racial hardship are filtered through her consciousness" ¹⁴.

Her status as protagonist is not only a matter of narrative structure but also of symbolic significance. Phoenix's actions walking the long, difficult path to town for her grandson's medicine define the story's core conflict and resolution. Thus, she embodies not only the story's central character but its thematic heart as well.

Phoenix Jackson herself is the main symbol of the story. Her name hints at to the mythical phoenix a bird that rises from its ashes, symbolizing rebirth and eternal life. Through this metaphor, Welty presents Phoenix not only as a character but as a representation of resilience and hope. According to critic Neil D. Isaacs, "Phoenix's repeated journeys and physical decline mirror the mythological bird's cycle of death and rebirth, emphasizing the strength of spirit over physical limitation" ¹⁵.

¹⁴ Kreyling, M. (1992). Eudora Welty's Achievements. *American Literary Review*, 17(2), 61–67.

¹⁵ Isaacs, N. D. (1962). Phoenix and the Mythical Cycle in Welty's Work. *American Literature*, 34(1), 90–95.

The worn path that Phoenix follows is other powerful symbol. It represents the struggle and repetition of life, especially for marginalized individuals in the Jim Crow South. The path is literally worn by her own footsteps, signifying both personal history and generational endurance. As Albert J. Griffith notes, “Welty’s path is an emblem of both persistence and oppression a cycle that binds Phoenix to her social reality and heritage”¹⁶.

Similarly, Goodman has also highlighted symbolic figures in his research. The landscape and obstacles Phoenix encounters such as barbed wire, a scarecrow, a thorn bush and a hunter are not just physical but metaphorical hurdles. These elements symbolize the societal barriers faced by African American women, particularly the elderly. The hunter, for example, casually threatens Phoenix and attempts to assert dominance, illustrating the casual racism and paternalism that characterized the South during Welty’s time¹⁷.

Additionally, the story’s final scene at the medical clinic, where Phoenix momentarily forgets why she came, underscores themes of aging and mental decline. Yet, her resolve quickly returns as she remembers her purpose: retrieving medication for her grandson. This act of love transcends her suffering and reinforces the story’s emotional essence. Literary scholar Patricia Wallace interprets this as “a metaphor for memory as both burden and salvation her love keeps her going even when her body and mind falter”¹⁸.

Other writers have commented on Welty’s ability to embed such profound meaning in seemingly simple narratives. Novelist Alice Walker praised Welty’s capacity to “capture the dignity of Black women in quiet but powerful terms,”¹⁹ emphasizing the symbolic depth of Phoenix’s character as a reflection of many unnamed heroines of the South.

Through “A Worn Path”, Welty constructs a narrative where every element from the character’s name to the path she walks functions on multiple symbolic levels. Her use of symbolism is not just literary decoration but a means to expose and explore deeper truths about human suffering, endurance and love.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that A Worn Path offers valuable and meaningful lessons for readers. Throughout the narrative, it is evident what the author intends to emphasize. The title A Worn Path is not chosen arbitrarily; it reflects the protagonist’s

¹⁶ Griffith, A. J. (1975). Symbols of Struggle: The Mythical Undertones in A Worn Path. Mississippi Quarterly, 28(3), 210–213.

¹⁷ Goodman, R. (1982). Southern Women and Symbolism in the Short Fiction of Eudora Welty. Journal of Southern Literature, 15(2), 45–61.

¹⁸ Wallace, P. (1994). The Burden of Memory in the Fiction of Eudora Welty. Southern Literary Journal, 26(2), 175–183.

¹⁹ Walker, A. (1983). In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

long, unending journey, which may seem simple on the surface, yet carries profound symbolic significance. Beneath this seemingly ordinary path lie rich symbolic representations that reveal deeper themes of struggle, endurance and purpose. This story continues to serve as a significant analytical tool for future literary studies and movements, highlighting the enduring relevance of Welty's symbolic storytelling.

REFERENCES

1. Porter, K. A. (1941). Introduction. In E. Welty, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (pp. vii–xi). New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
2. Hauser, M. (1941, November 9). Books of the Times. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>
3. Aldridge, J. W. (1970). Eudora Welty: Metamorphosis of a Southern Lady Writer. *Saturday Review*, 11 April, pp. 21–23.
4. Kreyling, M. (1992). Eudora Welty's Achievements. *American Literary Review*, 17(2), 61–67.
5. Isaacs, N. D. (1962). Phoenix and the Mythical Cycle in Welty's Work. *American Literature*, 34(1), 90–95.
6. Griffith, A. J. (1975). Symbols of Struggle: The Mythical Undertones in *A Worn Path*. *Mississippi Quarterly*, 28(3), 210–213.
7. Goodman, R. (1982). Southern Women and Symbolism in the Short Fiction of Eudora Welty. *Journal of Southern Literature*, 15(2), 45–61.
8. Wallace, P. (1994). The Burden of Memory in the Fiction of Eudora Welty. *Southern Literary Journal*, 26(2), 175–183.
9. Walker, A. (1983). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.