

Analyzing “A Worn Path” by Eudora Welty

Learning Goals

Students will demonstrate their understanding of:

- how authors develop themes;
- the three levels of meaning;
- how to analyze a story;
- how to read closely and annotate
- how context impacts the meaning of a story;
- how authors use symbols and motifs to create meaning;
- the hero’s journey archetype.

Directions: Because the story is fairly short, read it completely before addressing the points and questions listed below. You should log the definitions of the terms in bold. You will encounter these terms again.

1. According to *Perrine’s Literature*, “[t]he **theme** of a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied by the story. To derive the theme of a story, we must determine what its central purpose is: what view of life it supports or what insight into life it reveals.” Now that you have read the story once, in a single well developed sentence, express the primary theme of the story.
2. What is the significance of the title “A Worn Path”?
3. As you reread the story, note clues that help you determine when and where the story takes place. What is the context of the story?
4. What is significant about setting the story in December and during Christmas?
5. A **motif**, a unifying element in a piece of literature, may be created through recurrent images, symbols, character types, themes or stylistic formulas. An author usually incorporates motifs to aid in the development of the primary theme of her story. As you read “A Worn Path,” note words that are associated with time. Why is the time motif significant to the development of Welty’s theme?
6. Sight is another motif. Note places where Welty refers to eyes or sight. How does Phoenix’s inability to see well help establish the nature of her journey?
7. Why is Phoenix an appropriate name for the protagonist? Note where the author refers to birds. Considering the symbolic meaning of birds, how does the bird motif contribute to the development of meaning? As you reread, note any other motifs you discover.
8. In the first two paragraphs, Welty goes into great depth in her description of Phoenix. How does the description of Phoenix aid in the development of meaning?

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9. The **denotation** of “forest” is its dictionary definition, basically a group of trees. What other associations are evoked by the word “forest”? The **connotation** of a word is the implications of a word or its abstract meanings. With that definition in mind, what is significant about the forest?
10. What do the following represent: eyes, barbed wire, the dress, withered cotton field, scarecrow, trees silver in their dead leaves?
11. What point about human nature is Welty making through Phoenix’s encounter with the scarecrow?
12. Even though Phoenix is elderly, the white man treats her condescendingly, as if she were a child. Why do you think Welty does not give the man a name? What does he represent? What point is Welty making?
13. What is significant about the nickel?
14. What does Natchez represent? Its oak trees? Its steeple and cabins? Its little black children whirling around her? Its paved streets?
15. What does Missy who ties Phoenix’s shoelaces represent?
16. Describe the entry to the building. What do the stairs, its size, the golden document nailed to its door represent?
17. Define the treatment Phoenix experiences in the clinic. Provide some rationale for it. Are there any thematic similarities between the incident with the attendant and the encounter with the scarecrow?
18. Define the purpose of the brief bout of forgetfulness (from a literary point of view) that Phoenix experiences.
19. What does the grandson represent? Why is it significant that he cannot speak?
20. Why does the nurse label Phoenix stubborn? Is she stubborn?
21. What do the attendant’s pennies represent?
22. Why will she buy her grandson a windmill?
23. What is symbolic about her journey back?
24. Discuss secondary themes in “A Worn Path,” including what the story tells us about love and the nature of charity.
25. Refer to your response to question 1. Now that you have closely read the story, how could you revise your sentence?