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Errands of Love: a Study in Black and White

Joseph H. Gardner

In a justly celebrated essay, first published in *Critical Inquiry*, September 1974, Eudora Welty revealed that the one question she most often receives from both students and teachers who have discussed her well-known and well-loved story "A Worn Path" in their classes is this: "Is Phoenix Jackson's grandson really *dead*?"[1] The rest of the essay is devoted to showing why the question is irrelevant and why readers' absorption with it deflects from the story's central theme, a theme Welty then discusses with moving eloquence. There is, however, another question that can be legitimately asked of the story, a question whose answer reveals much about the concerns of the story itself, the nature of Welty's artistry, and some of the unconscious cultural assumptions that lie behind both: "Why is Phoenix Jackson black?"

For some, the question may be more than a little disturbing, especially if it is taken to suggest some unstated allegation of an underlying racism in a work whose appeal to "liberal" moral and cultural values is, and has been, strong, ever since its appearance in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* in 1941. The "liberal" response might well be that this question is also irrelevant, even insulting, both to Welty and to those readers on whom the tale has had a profound effect. Such readers might argue that while Phoenix's age, her frailty, her poverty, and the remoteness of her dwelling are all essential to the development of the story's plot and theme, her race is not. She could just as easily have been a Mexican *campesina*, a Scottish crofter, or a "poor-white" Southern sharecropper for that matter. Neither the power of her love nor the emotional force of the story would be diminished. Such a response is undoubtedly socially correct. It is also critically wrong. For the facts of the matter are that Welty *chose* to make Phoenix Jackson black and that her blackness is an integral part of the story's development and its impact on the reader.[2]

Other readers might respond to the question by saying that Phoenix Jackson is black because the *real* Phoenix was black, citing

Welty's assertion that the origin of "A Worn Path" came from an incident in real life: "One day I saw a solitary old woman like Phoenix. She was walking; I saw her, at middle distance, in a winter landscape, and watched her slowly make her way across my line of vision. That sight of her made me write the story" (*CI*, 220). A nitpicker might observe that when Welty states the old woman was "like Phoenix" she is not necessarily indicating that the woman was black, but there is no need to pick such nits. The "real" Phoenix has nothing to do with it. I take it as axiomatic that art is not life and that, because the artistic process involves the constant making of choices, we may legitimately assume that there is a reason for every element in the artifact, a reason that the artifact itself and the circumstances of its production (biographical, cultural, historical and so forth) are expected to provide. We are back again to the central fact that Welty *chose* to make Phoenix Jackson black. The reasoning behind the choice is both conscious and unconscious. It has to do with what Welty has identified as the "subject" of her story, with the mode in which she chose to present that subject, and with many deep-seated, and largely unexamined, attitudes towards blacks in American culture.

In the 1974 essay, Welty is quite explicit in stating the "subject" she wished to set forth. It is, she says, "the deep-grained habit of love" that motivates Phoenix's journey and sustains her through all its uncertainties and dangers (*CI*, 221). Elsewhere in the essay, she characterizes "A Worn Path" as "the story of an errand of love" and indicates that, for her at least, the "truth of the story" is the truth of Phoenix's love as revealed by the "wornness" of her path (*CI*, 220). Welty's language itself reveals that she conceives the story to be concerned with universals, with indeed the greatest universal of them all. It is also clear from her description of the story's origin that, from the very beginning, she wished to write it in such a way as would fully convey and underscore her sense of its universality. The passage quoted earlier continues, "I invented an errand for her, but that only seemed a living part of the figure she was herself; what errand other than for someone else could be making her go? And her going was the first thing, her persisting in her landscape was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep" (*CI*, 220). Just below the surface of Welty's words is the clear intimation that in seeing a solitary old woman slowly making her way across a desolate winter landscape she experienced the sense of having a vision of something archetypal.

Deeper below that same surface is the revelation of a series of extraordinary assumptions, most of them involving the race of her protagonist.

The most obvious of these assumptions is that the woman's errand is "an errand of love": "what errand other than for someone else could be making her go?" Such an assumption may be a reflection of a fundamental optimism about human nature and motives, but in the working out of the story itself, it also leads to Phoenix Jackson's blackness. Deeply engrained in American culture is the figure of a middle-aged or older black woman as the most powerful locus of sustaining maternal love and nurture the culture can imagine. Phoenix Jackson is no "Mammy" (even though the white hunter she encounters calls her "Granny"), but she is surely yet another manifestation of the American archetype embodied elsewhere in such figures as Faulkner's Dilsey, Berenice Sadie Brown in McCullers' *Member of the Wedding* or even Lena Younger in Hanson's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Reference to Faulkner points to another of Welty's unconscious, but nonetheless extraordinary, assumptions. What was "the real thing"—that is, the universal, archetypical thing—in Welty's vision was her sense of the old woman's "persisting in her landscape." Two elements of that sense are worth noting. One is that it predicates Phoenix's blackness in the immediate Faulknerian sense: "They endure." The other is that, like Faulkner, and like America itself, Welty assumes that blacks, somehow or other, are closer to the universal and archetypal—that is, to the mythic—than whites. Indeed, assertions about their persistence and endurance are, in large part, reflections of that potentially racist assumption. And since Welty conceived her story in terms of the universal, the archetypal, and the mythic ("Phoenix rose"), it follows that Phoenix Jackson would be black. Archetype shades into stereotype.

The origin of the stereotype lies in the Rousseauistic myth of the "Noble Savage" as tempered by and acclimated to the ironies of American social history. The subjugation and exploitation of blacks, from slavery to the present, depended (and depends) in part, upon the white conception of them as an "uncivilized," primitive, and therefore inferior race. But that same presumed primitiveness can also be made into a token of superiority. Since it places blacks outside the confines of Western, European "civilization," it thereby frees them from its discontents, especially the burden of loneliness and guilt occasioned by its egotistical empirical rationalism and its

acquisitive materialism. Blacks therefore become, in the American imagination, capable of an unselfish, self-sacrificing love inconceivable among "uptight," skeptical and self-centered whites, and closer to the magical powers and forces of a beneficent "Nature."

Expressions of such assumptions range from the banality of Walt Disney's Uncle Remus with cutesy cartoon bluebirds flitting around his head, to the power of Mrs. Stowe's vision of a black Christ crucified between two slaves and her concomitant hope that Liberia will save the world. Uncle Remus's closeness to the "critters" is a function of his inability to speak "civilized," "Standard English"; Mrs. Stowe sees a white world so corrupted by what she calls "the system," (i.e., that cold rationalism and calculating materialism of which the institution of chattel slavery is merely a symptom), that only the rebirth of a purified Christianity in the untainted reaches of exotic, primitive Africa can redeem it.[3] When, in "Livvie," Welty sets out to retell the myth of Demeter, she does so with an all-black cast of characters; Powerhouse, in the story by that name, is given mythic stature by being portrayed as a man in close touch with the supernatural "powers" of daemonic creativity. In a marvelous exercise in multiple ironies called "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," Alice Walker presents a highly sophisticated and "civilized" young black woman engaged in anthropological fieldwork who helps destroy a hated white by playing upon the white woman's deep-seated belief that black "rootworkers" do indeed have powers beyond the understanding of white skepticism and science.

In her presentation of Phoenix Jackson, Welty draws directly on such cultural assumptions. It is more than a simple matter of her talking to the "critters" or mistaking a scarecrow for a "haint." One notes, for example, such passages as her explanation of her dazed state when she finally reaches the doctor's office: " 'I never did go to school. I was too old at the Surrender,' she said in a soft voice. 'I'm an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me.' "[4] The passage does more than simply verify Phoenix's longevity. For Phoenix to refer to Appomattox and the fall of the Confederacy as "the Surrender" is to transfer it from the historical into a mythic realm and to carry Phoenix, as its namer and rememberer, along with it. She may be "an old woman without an education," but the entire story is devoted to showing her wisdom, a primal folk wisdom uncompromised by the rationalism of the

European (i.e., white) Enlightenment and unsullied by the pseudo-sophistication of white technology. Hence her illiteracy is part and parcel of her "persisting in her landscape" as something timeless and elemental. Although she seeks the medicine produced by the white man's science, she herself lives in an animistic, magic realm, where thorn bushes are possessed of volition and birds are divine messengers come to tell her of her peccadilloes (*Stories*, 143 and 146). For her to journey into the white man's city is to move not only into the realm of rationalist science and technology, but also into the realm of a younger, alien, and, ultimately banal, myth: "In the paved city it was Christmas time" (*Stories*, 146). The juxtaposition of "paved" and "Christmas" is perfect for Welty's purposes. Phoenix comes from an older (and hence, by implication, more authentic), more elemental and archetypal world. When the white hunter suspects that she is going to town to see Santa Claus, we are meant to feel the full force of the irony in his patronizing affront to her mythic dignity.[5]

It is not surprising, therefore, that almost all commentators on "A Worn Path," black and white, comment on its mythic patterns and allusions. One black critic, for example, notes that although Phoenix undergoes the "trial" of crossing a stream by means of a fallen log and wanders through the "maze" of the cornfield on her quest for the golden seal on the doctor's diploma in its golden frame, hers is not the story of the initiation of the mythic hero: "Old Phoenix has . . . reached full archetypal potential at the beginning of her story. . . . [She] is in direct communication with 'sunward forces' and with all of nature. . . . Phoenix needs no psychic growth, no initiation; she is possessed of the inner ordering of her existence, devoid of the egocentric, primitive in her ability to love another better than herself, in harmony with external nature, and at the height of her archetypal pattern of greatness."[6] The telling word here, of course, is "primitive"; that is to say, "black." A moment spent considering the phrase beginning "primitive in her ability" will reveal just how extraordinary and telling the assumptions behind it are.

The degree to which the peculiar power of "A Worn Path" depends upon the racial stereotype which associates Phoenix Jackson's blackness with her mythic stature can be seen by comparing it to essentially the same "subject,"—an "errand of love" performed for a sick child. Alice Walker's "Strong Horse Tea," far from striving for the eternal and archetypal, is purposefully

grounded in the particular and temporal and told in terms of the most unrelenting naturalism. In Walker's story the protagonist, Rannie Toomer, is a black unwed mother whose baby, Snooks, is dying of pneumonia. Rannie entreats a white mailman to send a doctor from town to the isolated cabin where she lives, but the mailman, frightened by Rannie's blackness, repulsed by her odor and too unconcerned to bother, simply passes the message on to a rootworker who lives down the road. Realizing there is no hope of obtaining a "real" doctor and desperate for her child's survival, Rannie attempts to fill the "witch's" prescription that the child be given "strong horse tea." After chasing a mare through the mud of a rain-soaked field, she finally succeeds in catching its urine in a plastic boot. Plugging a leak in the boot with her mouth, she staggers back toward the house where, the reader knows, her baby lies dead. Speculations about an author's motives are always fruitless, but if Walker had intended systematically to turn Welty's story inside out, she could not have done a more thorough job. Comparison of the two works, therefore, will show what happens when an essentially white myth is reinterpreted from the point of view of a black sense of reality.

One might begin with the two protagonist's names. "Phoenix Jackson," in its allusiveness, not only gives us our major clue to its possessor's mythic dimension, but is also pleasantly quaint and rolls euphoniously off the tongue. Welty herself has indicated she chose the name for both reasons (Prenshaw, 56 and 209). "Rannie Toomer," on the other hand, is purposefully ugly and "common," the kind of black name that generates the refined scorn of middle-class whites. One notes that the mailman makes his own assumptions about her name, repeatedly referring to her as "Rannie Mae." That she has named her baby "Snooks" only serves to confirm the reader's response to "Rannie."

Phoenix Jackson exists in a bright, sunlit landscape, stark in its winter outlines, yet sparkling with frost: "the sun made the pine needles almost too bright to look at" (*Stories*, 142). The coronas of light surrounding the objects drawing Phoenix's eye give a sense of divine lustration; the rime on the frozen ground shimmers with dewy magic. There is no enchantment in Rannie Toomer's world, only coldness, wet, and mud. The rain falls against her face "with the force of small hailstones." The elements greet her with the full fury of their hostility: "Thunder rose from the side of the sky like tires of a big truck rumbling over rough dirt road. Then it stood a

split second in the middle of the sky before it exploded like a giant firecracker, then rolled away again like an empty keg." Rannie can only huddle, dripping, under a tree, "hoping not to be struck."[7] Similarly, if Phoenix, like Disney's Uncle Remus, talks to the critters, Rannie's separateness from the hostile world of animals and the "animalistic" nature of her improvished existence are both established in one stroke; "Animals lived there in the pasture all around her house, and she and Snooks lived in it" (*In Love,* 93).

Welty continually emphasizes Phoenix's beauty and dignity. Everything about her is "all neat and tidy," as even her physical appearance serves to reveal her mythic stature: "Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles . . . but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper" (*Stories,* 142). Rannie Toomer, on the other hand, is homely, dirty, and wet. Our first glimpse of her in the story's second sentence shows her "gazing into the low fire, her long crusty bottom lip hanging." The mailman thinks she smells "like a wet goat" (*In Love,* 88 and 92).

While, as Welty notes in her essay, Phoenix suffers "some jolts to her pride," she also has "some flights of fancy to console her" and "a moment to dance and preen" (*CI,* 221). In other words, she catches her skirt in a thorn bush, is knocked over by a dog, envisions a child offering her a slice of marble-cake, and waltzes with a scarecrow. Rannie, on the other hand, knows only misery, degradation, and pain. Her only consoling "flight of fancy" is that a doctor is on his way, a fantasy mocked by the older, more experienced rootworker with bitter irony: "'White mailman, white doctor,' she chanted skeptically, under her breath, as if to banish spirits" (*In Love,* 89). If there are spirits in Rannie's world, they are, ironically, human, malignant, and white.

Phoenix's encounter with the white hunter is, perhaps, her moment of greatest danger, danger that begins to dissolve when he treats her with patronizing amusement. Welty skillfully manipulates ironies when the hunter waltzes with Phoenix just as she had earlier danced with the scarecrow—and the ironies all go against the hunter. The scene also allows Welty to add another facet to Phoenix's mythic stature as she becomes B'rer Rabbit the trickster, outwitting and gaining revenge on the oppressor Fox. Her momentary shame at pocketing his nickel is removed

immediately when he tells he would give her a dime "if I had any money with me" (*Stories*, 146). The scene prepares us for the ensuing episode when she "stiffly" insists that the office attendant give her another nickel instead of a few pennies (*Stories*, 148-49). Paradoxically, her doing so affirms her dignity rather than denying it.

Phoenix's encounter with the hunter is paralleled in Walker's text by Rannie's encounter with the mailman. Far from being amused by her, the mailman views Rannie only with revulsion. Contemptuous of her dull-witted ignorance, rendered uneasy by her blackness and her bedraggled homeliness, repulsed by the foulness of her breath, and offended by her smell, he hardly wants to dance. Frightened and angered by her desperation, he patronizes her dilemma: "Well, ah, *mighty* sorry to hear 'bout that little fella" (*In Love*, 92). And ultimately he betrays her.

As noted earlier, Phoenix is illiterate, but her illiteracy functions positively to place her in the timeless world of the honored "folk," a world of magic and mythic wisdom. She may seek the white man's medicine, but she herself lives in an animistic world where even a passing bird can serve as a divine messenger sent to scold her (*Stories*, 146). In full touch with natural powers, she becomes the focus of white veneration. Although Welty has denied the tradition that the episode in which Phoenix asks a white Christmas shopper to tie her shoe laces for her is based upon a "real life" incident in which an elderly black made a similar request of her (Prenshaw, 334), the tradition is symbolically appropriate. Throughout the tale one has the sense of something extraordinary taking place: an author kneeling down in her own fiction to pay homage to her own creation.

No one kneels before Rannie Toomer. Like Phoenix, she, too, is illiterate, but her illiteracy reveals only her ignorance, not a fund of folk wisdom. If she is wise, it is only in her rejection of powerworking: "I don't believe in none of that swamp magic. All the old home remedies I took when I was a child come just short of killing me" (*In Love*, 88). Indeed, her desperation in seeking a "REAL doctor" (*In Love*, 91) and her horror at realizing the mailman's betrayal gives the story its heartwrenching power. The whole tale insists upon the bitter irony that Rannie sets out on her "errand of love" for the only remedy she can get. Nor does her illiteracy earn her veneration. The mailman feels nothing but contempt for her inability to understand the advertising circulars

that are her only mail. Appropriately enough, however, he himself shares assumptions similar to those that lie behind Welty's story: "He half believed with everybody else in the county that the old blue-eyed black woman possessed magic. Magic that if it didn't work on whites probably would on blacks" (*In Love,* 92).

Finally, Welty insists, both in the tale and in her essay about it, on the purity of Phoenix's "deep-grained habit of love." Although, as Phoenix explains to the nurse, she and her grandson "is the only two left in the world" (*Stories,* 148), it is also clear that the grandson is Phoenix's world. Hence the profoundly moving optimism of both essay and tale:

> The habit of love cuts through confusion and stumbles or contrives its way out of difficulty, it remembers the way even when it forgets, for a dumbfounded moment, its reason for being. The path is the thing that matters. (*CI,* 221)

Walker, on the other hand, while equally insistent upon the strength of Rannie's love for her baby and her paradoxical dignity and heroism in sticking desperately to a "path" that drenches her body with cold rain, coats her with mud, and fills her mouth with horse urine, makes that love a matter of more mixed motives: Rannie, she tells us, "was not married. Was not pretty. Was not anybody much. And he was all she had" (*In Love,* 88).

It all boils down to what you know. Walker and Welty first met in the summer of 1973. In her account of the interview, Walker notes that she felt curiously relaxed in Welty's home and wonders if that relaxation "means something terrible," given

> how different we are—in age, color, in the directions we have had to take in this life. . . . For this *is* Mississippi, U.S.A., and black, white, old, young, Southern black and Southern white—all these labels have meaning for a very good reason: they have effectively kept us apart, sometimes brutally. So that, although we live in the same town, we inhabit different worlds. . . . Though we are both writers, writing in some cases from similar experiences, and certainly from the same territory, we are more strangers, because the past will always separate us; and because she is white and not young, and I am black and not old (Prenshaw, 145-146).

Accordingly, despite her "relaxation," Walker gives a distinct edge to many of her questions, especially those that implicitly contrast Welty's experiences with those of such black writers as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright. Perhaps the same edge lies behind what, for the purposes of this essay, is her central question: "Over the years have you known any black women? Really known them?" (Prenshaw, 151).

In a sense, Walker had already implied an answer to that question in her remarks about white women and black women necessarily being strangers to each other. It is precisely because Welty is outside the world of black women that she can envisage a Phoenix Jackson in all her mythic grandeur. Walker, writing from inside that world, sees Rannie Toomer in all her heartbreaking reality.

NOTES

[1]Eudora Welty, "Is Phoenix Jackson Really Dead?" *Critical Inquiry* I(1974), 219-221. Subsequently cited as *CI*.

[2]In an interview with Jo Brans, November 1980, Welty acknowledges as much. "I don't think that story would be the same story with a white person." Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, *Conversations with Eudora Welty* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 334-35. Subsequently cited as Prenshaw.

[3]See especially George Shelby's "letter to one of his friends" in Chapter XLIII and Mrs. Stowe's own "Concluding Remarks" in Chapter XLV. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly*, (Boston and Cleveland: John P. Jewett & Co., 1852).

[4]Eudora Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), 148. Subsequently cited as *Stories*.

[5]One also notes that the hunter uses his gun—another product of white technology—to kill the creatures Phoenix talks to.

[6]Zelma Turner Howard, *The Rhetoric of Eudora Welty's Short Stories* (Jackson, MS: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 71-72.

[7]Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), 96. Subsequently cited as *In Love*.