



Symbolic Representation of Journey in Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" : Comparison and Contrast

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' and Eudora Welty's 'A Worn Path' not only diverge significantly but also share similarities. The theme of a journey intertwines these two literary creations hailing from markedly diverse genres. Despite employing a common theme, both these works articulate distinct perspectives and thoughts through divergent lenses. While the overarching theme aligns in both pieces, disparate characters, symbolism, and settings uniquely characterize each composition. This paper attempts to examine and delve into the symbolic representation of 'journey' as portrayed by Robert Frost and Eudora Welty in their respective literary compositions.

Brief Introduction of the Writers: Robert Frost and Eudora Alice Welty

Within the realm of American modern literature, Robert Frost stands esteemed as the "American Poet Laureate" and ranks among the most illustrious and widely cherished poets. His verses, set against the backdrop of New England, are brimming with picturesque landscapes and imbued with the essence of his toil and experience. Frost employs a relatively conventional prosody, showcasing his distinctive writing technique and traits. This enables him to captivate a diverse readership, spanning from erudite literary connoisseurs to everyday readers, all of whom can approach his poems from a dual vantage point, encompassing both enigmatic modernism and a comparatively more lucid Victorian writing style. In pursuit of this objective, this discourse endeavors to explore how this eminent luminary seamlessly melds traditional forms with contemporary ethos in his masterpieces, such as "The Road Not Taken," "Birches", "Fire and Ice," and others.

Eudora Alice Welty, an accomplished American storyteller, novelist, and photographer, is well known

for gaining recognition for her exploration of the Southern United States. Her book, *The Optimist's Daughter*, clinched the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Welty earned numerous accolades, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Order of the South. Originally hailing from Jackson, Mississippi, Welty's writing style and the characters she brought to life were profoundly influenced by her keen observations and intimate connection with the land. Remarkably, she holds the distinction of being the inaugural living author to have her literary works published by the Library of America. Today, her residence in Jackson, Mississippi stands as a National Historic Landmark, welcoming the public as a museum dedicated to preserving her legacy. Welty's inaugural foray into short story publication occurred in 1936, marking the commencement of a consistent presence in literary outlets. Initially featured in modest publications like the *Southern Review*, her contributions later found a place in prominent periodicals, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*. Following the release of *A Curtain of Green* (1941; expanded 1979), a collection of short stories housing two of her



extensively anthologized pieces—"The Petrified Man" and "Why I Live at the P.O."—her audience witnessed a gradual and sustained expansion.

Frost's The Road Not Taken - Explanation and Analysis

In 1916, Frost unveiled 'The Road Not Taken,' a renowned poem in his repertoire. The poem stands as a renowned poetic work delving into life's intricate choices and the irreversible nature of decisions encountered along life's odyssey. The verse unfolds through the perspective of a lone traveler who is met with the divergence of two trails, symbolizing the profound journey of life and the choices interwoven within it.

**"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could."**

The poem delves into the quandary of an individual standing at a crossroads, emblematic of real-life scenarios. Life often confronts us with moments demanding tough decisions, where discerning right from wrong becomes a challenge. The poet, at the crossroads, scrutinizes each path meticulously, extending his gaze as far as possible. Before committing to one, he seeks a profound understanding of its essence, weighing its merits and demerits—an analogy to the dilemmas we encounter in life.

Similar to life's decisions, the poet contemplates the advantages and disadvantages of each path. He gazes at one for an extended period, discerning its course until it vanishes into the foliage. Decisions in life necessitate foresight into future consequences, much like the poet's contemplation.

Following contemplation, a decision is reached—the pathway described as "grassy and want(ing) wear" embodying the essence of adventure and individualistic pursuit.

The poet, after careful consideration, opts for the less-trodden path, perceiving both options as equally viable. His choice, a grassy route indicative of minimal foot traffic, becomes his preferred journey, suggesting that the less conventional path held a distinctive allure. The poet envisions a future where he will reflect on this pivotal decision, acknowledging that choosing the less-frequented route defined his journey. He foresees recounting this choice, underscoring its impact on shaping his destiny.

The concluding lines in particular,

**"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."**

are frequently cited and regarded as motivating expressions that encourage us to surmount life's challenges.

In a nutshell, the poem conveys a significant message that in the pursuit of our aspirations, we occasionally embrace decisions unconventional to the majority. The belief persists that failures offer chances for reinvention. However, the journey unfolds, and retrospection may reveal either regret or the emergence of an extraordinary self. The poem underscores the significance of prudent decision-making, recognizing that our choices intricately mold our destinies.

Eudora Welty's A Worn Path' - Explanation and Analysis

"A Worn Path" is a brief narrative penned by Eudora Welty, making its debut in the pages of Atlantic Monthly magazine in 1941. This tale found its place among the stories comprising Welty's inaugural collection, "A Curtain of Green", earning accolades for its evocative portrayal of locale. Securing the second place in the O. Henry Award of 1941, this narrative endures as one of Welty's prominently recognized concise compositions.

The narrative unfolds the odyssey of an elderly African American woman named Phoenix Jackson. Her expedition spans the vast distance from her abode in the rustic corners of Mississippi to Natchez, driven by the imperative to procure medicine for her grandson.

"It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson."

Along this arduous route, Jackson confronts a myriad of challenges, ranging from tangible hurdles like dense woodlands and traversing a creek, to intangible ones such as a disconcerting encounter with a Caucasian man on the road, from whom she cunningly acquires a dropped nickel. The prevailing motif of the story encapsulates the indomitable perseverance of its main character, who tenaciously embarks on this recurring pilgrimage across the unforgiving terrain of the Depression-era Southern landscape, all in devotion to her cherished grandson.



The narrative encapsulates themes of tenacity, a readiness to confront obstacles, and a willingness to embrace challenges.

"Old Phoenix said, 'Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals! ... Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites ... Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don't let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way.'" The title, "A Worn Path," overtly references Phoenix's recurrent trek to Natchez in pursuit of medicine for her ailing grandson. However, it also symbolically alludes to life itself, particularly Phoenix's life—a journey marked by repeated traversing and endurance in the face of the surrounding world. This endurance is portrayed as a gradual force that leaves an indelible mark or "path" through her surroundings.

Throughout her journey, Phoenix grapples with power dynamics tied to her age, race, and class. Despite these challenges, she not only endures but strategically employs her supposedly vulnerable position to her advantage. Phoenix, though rescued by a white hunter after falling into a ditch, rejects his suggestions to turn back. Instead, she skillfully navigates situations, seeking assistance when needed and even managing to acquire a nickel from the hunter. Her interactions in the hospital reflect a duality of inner fortitude and social vulnerability, transforming weakness into a form of power.

Phoenix's recurrent odyssey along this "well-treaded path," fraught with hardships, is executed with clockwork precision. Her ability not only to secure medicine but also to gather enough funds for a gift for her grandson underscores how perseverance can empower even those seemingly in positions of weakness. Phoenix's triumph, though seemingly modest, serves as a testament to the significance of these everyday victories, suggesting that such "small" triumphs might eventually forge the "well-treaded path" leading Phoenix and, perhaps, the post-slavery Southern Black community out of powerlessness.

The story's conclusion resides in a realm of ambiguity, eluding easy classification as either joyous or sorrowful. It stands as a triumph for Phoenix, showcasing her resilience and unwavering resolve in navigating challenging landscapes, enduring physical adversities, and confronting adversarial encounters on her journey. With the remedy secured, she strides homeward, a testament to her unyielding spirit.

Symbolic Representation of Journey: Comparison and Contrast

Both these literary works convey a similar essence and expression through their protagonists and depict life as a journey, highlighting that the outcomes are intricately tied to the paths we traverse. Additionally, both works emphasize that life's journey frequently entails hurdles and challenges, compelling the sojourner to persist and reach the culmination of this odyssey.

In 'The Road Not Taken,' the narrator, while journeying along a path, encounters a fork where two roads diverge. Contemplating which path to choose, he opts for the less-traveled one, distancing himself from the bustling crowd and embracing proximity to nature. In 'A Worn Path,' the narrative centers on Phoenix, an elderly African American woman striving to procure medicine for her grandson. To reach the town, she traverses challenging pinewoods alone, similarly isolated from the crowd and close to nature. On a philosophical level, the narrator's expedition in 'The Road Not Taken' seems driven by the desire to transition from the commonplace to the unknown—a potentially perilous yet potentially transformative journey. Phoenix's journey, on the other hand, contradicts her physical condition. Despite being an elderly African American woman in a predominantly white society, she believes she can defy adversities and accomplish her mission. Both journeys aim to rectify societal misconceptions or instigate change.

The literary compositions, "The Road Not Taken" and "A Worn Path" both commence with nature's depiction, uniquely set apart by two distinct seasons. Frost's poem initiates with "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," evoking a fall ambiance. The mention of leaves untrodden in black signifies 'autumn season', the only season when leaves amass in noticeable piles. Frost's poetic expression, ostensibly encapsulating a conflicting phase in his life, concludes inconclusively. Despite the initial divergence, the revelation unfolds that the paths are essentially identical.

Contrastingly, Welty's narrative leaves no room for conjecture; it opens unequivocally with "It was December," immediately evoking the winter chill. While Frost adopts a first-person perspective with scant details about his character, Welty employs a third-person narrative replete with intricate specifics. Welty's



protagonist faces no choice in her journey; her path is predetermined, a well-trodden passage of hardship. Unlike Frost, she is compelled by the exigency of her grandson's life.

In "The Road Not Taken," the character grapples with a life-altering decision, indicative of a pivotal juncture. Notably younger than Welty's Phoenix, the traveler stands at a crossroads of choices. Conversely, Phoenix's journey is not of her choosing; it is thrust upon her. The decision-maker casts a pall of destitution over her life. Evidently ailing, Phoenix's visual impairment is apparent. She employs an umbrella as a makeshift cane, navigating with eyes seemingly closed. Her persistent tapping suggests significant visual impairment, if not complete blindness, reinforcing the notion that her path is dictated by circumstances beyond her control.

Conclusion

The central motif threading through "The Road Not Taken" and "A Worn Path" revolves around the symbolism of a journey. Although both employ a common theme, they articulate distinct ideologies through varied characters, symbolism, and locales. These literary compositions underscore how existence is akin to a journey, with life's outcomes intricately linked to the paths traversed. The interpretation of a journey is subjective, varying among individuals based on their perspectives. Some perceive it merely as the distance covered to reach a destination, overlooking the concealed significance within each step. Conversely, others embrace the excitement of an unpredictable and unknown journey, relishing the interplay of positive and negative elements encountered along the way.

Journeys wield a transformative power, shaping lives and altering beliefs and thoughts. Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken" delves into life's divergent junctures, emphasizing how decisions at different life stages mold the future. The poem not only contemplates life's varied courses but also prompts readers to reflect on the impact of opportunities, individualism, and chances on outcomes. In contrast, Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" paints a distinct narrative. Despite divergent settings, the common thread lies in the element of choice—echoed in Phoenix Jackson's repeated decision to traverse the worn path for her grandson's well-being.

Both compositions illustrate that life's journey is a complex tapestry, interwoven with choices that navigate the twists and turns of individual narratives. The journey becomes a metaphorical canvas where

decisions, experiences, and encounters contribute to the evolving tapestry of one's existence.

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