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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mindfulness, Movement and Rhythms as Coping Strategies for Handling Stress in Eudora Welty's "A worn Path"

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the character of Phoenix Jackson in Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path". Firstly, this study tentatively identifies Phoenix Jackson's journey as a source of trauma in light of Kalsched's (2021) claim that trauma occurs when we experience more than we can bear consciously, and suggests possible coping strategies that may have been used to alleviate stress, thereby preventing physical exhaustion. Secondly, the study considers the journey Jackson makes in quest of medicine for her ailing grandson, in spite of the physical aspect of her advanced age, as well as being poor, female and black. Thirdly, the study tracks Phoenix Jackson's actions and reactions as she encounters thorny bushes, water streams, barbed wire, scary animals, and other things in her environment, as well as a human world permeated by race, gender, and class divisions. Overall, this study suggests that 'mindfulness', 'movement' and 'rhythms' may have been among the strategies that have reduced Phoenix Jackson's stress and improved her failing strength.

INTRODUCTION

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" tells the story of an elderly African- American woman who undertakes a risky walking journey from Natchez Trace to the town of Tatchez, on a chilly December morning. Her mission is to procure medicine for her ailing grandson who has accidentally ingested lye, a chemical substance which has caused his throat to swell up. As the intake of this chemical substance entails esophageal injury causing a child *'to slowly waste away from starvation and dehydration'* (Mellisa, 2009:2), the boy's life is seriously threatened.

Despite Phoenix Jackson's advanced age, poverty and frailty of body she has to make this journey to town regularly to get the medicine to nurture her grandson back to health, being the only surviving member of their family.

The journey, which Phoenix Jackson has presumably made many times before, and is likely to make many times in the future, is full of hurdles and difficulties. Firstly, she is very old and feeble. The White hunter who lifts her out of the ditch in one of the story's episodes notices this about her, *"you must be a hundred years old"* (Welty, 1971: 283), and she admits her old age when she finds out that the thing, she misperceives at first as a man, and then as a ghost is only a scarecrow. In her own words: *"My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know*" (Welty, 1971: 279). Also, her wrinkles bespeak old age *'her face has numberless branching wrinkles"* (Welty, 1971: 276), as does her cane, which helps her walk "*Under her small black-freckled hand her cane*." (Welty, 1971: 276). Secondly, Phoenix Jackson's journey, which seems to be the only option she has, is fraught with all

kinds of danger. She goes through many obstacles, including thorny bushes, water streams, barbed wire, and an encounter with a large dog, among other challenges that include a human world permeated by race, gender, and class divisions (Claxton, 2015). All these obstacles function in the story to challenge and delay her but nothing can bend her will or thwart her from reaching her goal.

Phoenix Jackson's situation is probably best captured by the common phrase 'biting off more than one could chew'. Owen (2001:30) argues the same in his claim that "*her race, her gender, her age, her oddity, her frailty, her poverty, her illiteracy all work against her in the segregated patriarchal world of the old deep South."*

Relevantly, Warfield's (2017) assertion that the journey Phoenix Jackson undertakes is more central to the story than the purpose behind it reminds the reader that the way is more important than the destination. He states that "*after the difficult journey and numerous obstacles, Phoenix loses momentarily her sense of where she is and why she is there*" (Warfield, 2017: 219). This loss of memory results from old age and, possibly as Dilgen (2014) claims, from the nightmarish experience of being "*old, black, a woman, and impoverished*"(63) venturing through wilderness by herself while haunted by the idea of death which, according to Donlan (1973) surrounds her from all directions. The central assertion of the present study is that what Phoenix Jackson has gone through qualifies as a traumatic experience. In labeling Phoenix Jackson's experience as traumatic, this study adopts Kalsched's (2021) view of trauma as "*the fact that we are all given more to experience in this life than we can bear to experience consciously*"(Kalsched, 2021: 444). However, the severe psychological dissociative sense of trauma as occurs in real life is outside the scope of the present study, as it can only be administered by a specialist in psychological counseling. Kalsched's (2021) definition of trauma seems to apply fittingly to almost all aspects of Phoenix Jackson's life. The journey around which the whole story is structured is lengthy and pervaded by all kinds of dangers, and even if she is lucky enough to reach her destination safely, she cannot afford to buy the medicine, and therefore, cannot get it unless it is given to her for free. Moreover, if she could secure the medicine, it only soothes the pain temporarily; the symptoms will always keep coming back.

Analysis

Having established Phoenix Jackson's status and, tentatively, identified her experience as traumatic, one may formulate the hypothesis that there are innate patterns of behavior Phoenix Jackson has exhibited that might have possibly acted as coping strategies for the bitter consciousness of the pains and frustrations of the journey on the one hand, and the empathy she feels for her chronically sick grandson on the other hand. This study's hypothesis will be discussed in relation to Tailor, et al's (2020) strategies for handling mild trauma in order to self-regulate and go on with life, namely (1) mindfulness, (2) movement, (3) rhythms and action. The study will try to offer a reading of the story that involves these three anti-traumatic defense strategies.

Essentially the story runs as follows:

The story is about the tough journey that Phoenix makes through the woods of Mississippi to the town of Natchezn in a cold December day. The path which Phoenix walks through is full of obstacles and hardships including the wild nature of the wood, in addition to encountering a rude hunter who becomes a burden to her old age and short eyesight. However, Phoenix is determined to continue her journey which she used to make periodically. The motivation behind the journey is only revealed at the end of the story. Phoenix wants to get the medicine for her grandson who has swallowed Lye and as a result he loses his voice and ability to breathe smoothly. The story ends with Phoenix intending to buy a paper windmill for the grandson, after getting The the medicine, and making her way back home. Abdul Muttaleb (2021: 167).

The point that needs to be reiterated at the onset of this analysis section is that what sets the old woman on her path and strengthens her will to make the journey is the unselfish love for her

grandson and her desire to spare no effort to save his life (Byrne, 1989; Claxton, 2015, Fuller, 2013). Fuller (2013) gives more weight to this point by noting that Eudora Welty is supposed to have said that Phoenix Jackson's journey is just an "*errand of love*", and that the story should not be evaluated in terms of whether the journey will be successful or not, (or even whether her grandson will die or is already dead or not). Consistently, Dilgen (2014) identifies Phoenix Jackson's journey as a walk of many miles that reflects her courage and stubbornness, and as an embodiment of all the complexities of her life. Whether or not the grandson will die or is already dead, Phoenix Jackson's journey still has a positive psychological impact on her, as it becomes a possible way of coping with loss and grief. Otherwise, the alternative would be to give up altogether; stay at home, see the grandson suffer without being able to comfort or help him in any way, or worse yet, to see him die and thence suffer bereavement for the rest of her life. The journey with its changing situations provides a variety of chances for Phoenix to act positively, and to be raised to the status of a heroine.

Now let's inspect the plot of "A worn Path" with reference to the three coping strategies that Tailor, et al (2020) suggest as ways to handle mild trauma. They are:(1) mindfulness, (2) movement, (3) rhythms and action.

Movement:

With the unpleasant reality of her grandson's sickness in mind, the old, frail, poor, female and black Phoenix Jackson does not remain inactive for a single moment. When the story opens, she is introduced to the reader as an old African-American woman walking on a path through the pinewoods of the Mississippi on her journey to town to get medicine for her sick grandson. It is worthy of note that not until towards the end of the story does the reader know the reason behind this archetypal journey:

Throat never heals, does it?" said the nurse, speaking in a loud, sure voice to old Phoenix. By now she had a card with something written on it, a little list. "Yes. Swallowed lye. When was it—?January—two, three years ago—(Welty, 1971: 287)

Phoenix Jackson has inspiringly negotiated every detail of her journey throughout the wilderness that separates her home from the town, talking to animals, trees, and people. However, she becomes quite dumb and irresponsive to the nurse and attendant when she is comfortably seated on a chair in the hospital, and once she gets the medicine and some charity money with which she buys a toy windmill for her grandson, she starts her journey back home without delay:

"This is what come to me to do," she said. "I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world. I'll march myself back where he waiting, holding it straight up in this hand." (Welty, 1971: 289).

Phoenix Jackson's very brief stay in the town recalls Claxton's (2015) assertion that this journey matters more than the purpose behind it, and that the significance of place to Phoenix Jackson is not in stagnation, but through the cyclical movement she makes. Phoenix Jackson's persistent journey, through which the most striking aspects of her character are communicated, plays a great role for re-establishing her psychological wellbeing. It serves as a coping mechanism that the old woman unconsciously uses to ease tension and distress. As the plot progresses, Phoenix Jackson is seen making her way through the woods: *"she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows*" (Welty, 1971: 275), walking along a road that ascends a hill "*The path ran up the hill*", and she reflects that it seems "*like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far"* (Welty, 1971: 276), then crossing a stream of water on a log, *'Now comes the trial,' said Phoenix. Putting her right foot out, she mounted the log and shut her eyes*, (Welty, 1971: 277) amidst many other movement-based activities.

Welty's story is told from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator who knows all about Phoenix Jackson's thoughts and feelings and consequently, the reader is allowed to see into Phoenix

Jackson's inner world. From this exposure of her feelings and thoughts, one has every reason to believe that Phoenix Jackson seems to lose her psychological well-being when she stops moving. To illustrate this point, the first time Phoenix Jackson stops for rest she dare not close her eyes, for fear of both real and imagined dangers. In spite of the fact that she is wide- awake she hallucinates and sees a boy offering her a cake. She accepts the offer and when she stretches her hand to take it, she finds only her hand stretched in the air.

She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble-cake on it she spoke to him. 'That would be acceptable,' she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air. (Welty, 1971: 278)

Based on the above quotation, any state of motionlessness might render her vulnerable to visual and acoustic hallucinations in which the seemingly real fleeting moment of hope is instantaneously followed by disappointment. Another episode of non-movement is when she has fallen into the ditch. She cannot help herself out of the ditch, and no one seems to be around to offer any kind of assistance either. She remains motionless inside the trench. Again, the cessation of her movement makes her susceptible to delusion:

Down there, her senses drifted away. A dream visited her, and she reached her hand up, but nothing reached down and gave her a pull. So she lay there and presently went to talking (Welty, 1971: 281).

Once more she has a short-lived happy dream followed by disappointment. The dream of someone offering his hand to pull her out of the ditch turns out to be as false as that of the boy with the cake.

In addition to provoking false consciousness, the state of motionlessness lowers her sense of self-esteem, and cultivates a feeling of unworthiness in her. When a White young man finds her in the ditch and asks her what she is doing there, she answers him:

'Lying on my back like a June bug waiting to be turned over, mister,' she said, reaching up her hand(Welty, 1971: 281).

Although this scene carries a strong sense of humor, Phoenix Jackson's reference to herself as a June bug waiting to be turned over conveys an extreme sense of devaluation. This particular scene recalls the opening of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning from uneasy dreams to find that he has been transformed into a gigantic insect. Kafka's protagonist has to tolerate the heartless treatment of his superiors at his demanding job for the sake of his family, and then finds himself metamorphosed into a bug. Probably Gregor Samsa and Phoenix Jackson go through the same lengthy process of anguish marked by humiliation, and from which no release seems at hand. The identicalness of the images of the bug on its back in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis" and Welty's "A Worn Path" tempts one to think that Kafka has probably been consciously imitated by Welty.

A further illustration of the fact that Phoenix Jackson is fine so long as she is moving forward and that her psychological ill-being is connected to stability is in the scene of the town. When she enters the town, and is still walking, she asks a passing shopper to tie her shoes for her. This indicates that she is fully conscious of the fact that in the city she should look her best: " *do alright for out in the country, but wouldn't look right to go in a big building*" (Welty, 1971: 285). However, when she gets to the hospital- her destination- and sits on a chair, she experiences a loss of memory. She cannot answer even the most basic questions posed by the attendant, such as who she is and why she is there, until the attendant wonders if she is deaf.

Mindfulness:

Simply defined, Mindfulness is the art of conscious living. It is understood as the way of being when engaged in an activity rather than the activity itself (Kabat-Zinn, 2001). Projecting this

understanding, in a broad sense, onto Phoenix Jackson, one may perceive that her movement represents a focused effort. Though at times she seems lost in dreams and reveries, she never allows dreams to divert her attention from the obstacles that block her path and never deviates from her set track. She seems to be marked by a tendency to immerse herself fully in present-moment mindfulness.

Among the episodes in which Phoenix Jackson seems to typically exhibit mindfulness in order to handle a situation is the stream episode. Over the course of her journey, Phoenix Jackson comes to a stream of water with a log used as a bridge, and she has to walk over it to cross to the other side. The log is so thin that it seems very likely that she will fall off it. To summon her full concentration on 'the trial' as the narrator calls it, she closes her eyes:

Now comes the trial,' said Phoenix. Putting her right foot out, she mounted the log and shut her eyes. Lifting her skirt, leveling her cane fiercely before her like a festival figure in some parade, she began to march across. Then she opened her eyes and she was safe on the other side (Welty, 1971: 277-78).

Undoubtedly, at this moment Phoenix is served well by close attention and single-mindedness more than by her eyesight, which is poor anyway. To ensure full concentration she lifts her skirt, levels her cane and begins to move across the stream.

As this way of handling the cane helps her walk steadily on the log, and to cross it safely, another way of handling the cane causes her to lose her balance and fall into the ditch. That is when she raises the cane to fend off the black dog '*with lolling tongue*'(Welty, 1971: 281). In the first situation she assumes a straight posture for both the body and the cane at the moment of crossing the log, and that makes Phoenix more focused and freer of distraction. In the second situation, she raises the cane to hit the dog, so that her concentration swings between keeping her balance on the ground, and trying to drive away the attacking dog. She falls into the ditch because her concentration is disrupted.

A further example of Phoenix Jackson's mindfulness occurs in the theft scene. When she has been tempted to take the nickel that has fallen out of the White hunter's pocket, she keeps her attention on the nickel, and distracts the hunter's attention from it. She goads him into chasing the black dog, and when he comes back the nickel is safe in her pocket. Her poor sight does not hinder her from spotting and picking up the coin because she makes up for this deficiency by the utmost use of the mind's concentration powers.

the lids stretched down over her eyes, as if she were doing this in her sleep. Her chin was lowered almost to her knees. The yellow palm of her hand came out from the fold of her apron. Her fingers slid down and along the ground under the piece of money with the grace and care they would have in lifting an egg from under a setting hen. Then she slowly straightened up, she stood erect, and the nickel was in her apron pocket (Welty, 1971: 283).

To paraphrase the quote above, the manual dexterity with which Phoenix Jackson stoops, picks up the coin and hides it in her pocket reflects a person who is fully mindful and engaged in the present-moment experience. This mindfulness and concentration of the senses with which she handles the theft proves Orr's (1992) point that the successful spotting of the nickel in spite of her weak eyesight represents a contradiction in the story, to be a likely misreading. It is no wonder that she spots the nickel with the little eyesight she has, as she has made up for her eyesight's shortcoming with her intense attention and mindfulness. The counter-example which supports this reading is that the hunter, with his presumably perfect eyesight, fails to see the nickel drop from his pocket because at that moment he is in a state of mind that lacks focus and mindfulness. In fact, this state of inattention occurs to him twice. Firstly, he distracts himself by being deeply taken in by laughter at his unfeeling,

derogatory comment that Black People go to town only for Santa Claus. It is during this fit of laughter that the nickel falls out of his pocket unnoticed. Secondly, it is Phoenix Jackson who maliciously distracts his attention from the nickel by setting him against the black dog. When he disappears to look for the dog and punish it, she picks the nickel from the ground and hides it in her pocket. This scene gives rise to two points. On the surface level, the hunter appears to be gullible and easily manipulated as we see that Phoenix Jackson goads him into chasing the dog deliberately in order to steal the nickel. On a deeper level, however, the hunter represents the general attitude of the Whites towards the African-Americans; it is this condescending attitude and failure to perceive that a White man could be taken advantage of by a Black woman that makes him the victim of Phoenix's swindling scheme. According to Orr (1992) Phoenix Jackson is able to use the White man's assumptions against him and get what she wants, namely the nickel.

In the same regard, Akin (2017) argues that the White hunter's stereotyping of Phoenix Jackson suggests a number of interesting points. Firstly, it suggests that he takes her not to be worthy of any serious mission on account of his lack of knowledge about her and his lack of understanding of what might have spurred her to make this journey. Secondly, she cannot correct his assumptions about her due to racist and sexist considerations that prohibit her from telling a Whiteman he is wrong. However, the end result is that, while the hunter patronizes her, Phoenix Jackson proves to be eminently practical and committed to make things work in her favor by all means and, in every way, possible.

Another episode that embodies a moment of mindfulness is when Phoenix Jackson finally makes it to the town. It is Christmas and the whole town is shining with decorations and lights in daytime. According to Claxton (2015: 84), Phoenix Jackson gets to the right place –the hospital- only because she distrusts her eyesight and depends on her feet to guide her.

Old Phoenix would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her(Claxton 2015: 84).

Undoubtedly, among the effective ways to release tension is meditation. Simultaneously, Phoenix Jackson pays full attention to the twists of the path as she indulges in meditation. She enters into internal monologues in which the threatening situations in her immediate environment are mindfully negotiated and contested. For example, she personifies and addresses the thorns that have caught her dress "*Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little green bush"*. (Welty, 1971: 277)

In these words, she acknowledges the prickly nature of shrubs, and that by catching her dress the thorns have only done what they have been created to do. This being so, she blames it on her fading eyesight instead of being angry with the thorns. It is through such mindful analyses of the challenges faced along her way that she gains insight into how to deal with them genuinely and, accordingly, engages laboriously in extricating herself from the thorny bush in order to come out with minimal damage to her body and dress.

Rhythm and Action:

A close examination of Phoenix Jackson's movements reveals rhythmic patterns that she may have unconsciously produced to ease tension and stress and thereby improve her strength. When the story opens, Phoenix Jackson emerges from the shadows of trees, walking on the path through the pinewoods on her journey to town to get the medicine for her bedridden grandson. Her movement seems to follow a rhythmic pattern similar to the pendulum of a clock:

she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock(Welty, 1971: 275).

Not only is the way she moves likened to the rhythm of a pendulum swinging inside a clock, but the phrases *'moving a little from side to side*', '*...her steps with the balanced heaviness and lightness*", and "*she walks slowly*" also evoke the image of dancing and music.

The image of the pendulum also connotes the regularity and cyclical nature of Phoenix's journey to and from town. This last point is emphasized by what the nurse reveals about Phoenix Jackson when the attendant at the check-in desk, stereotypically, labels her a charity case. The nurse tells the clerk that the old black woman "*doesn't come for herself—she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork."* (Welty, 1971: 286).

Also, the rhythmic pattern of walking is indicated by the persistent tapping of the cane she carries, on the frozen ground under her feet. It is described as follows:

"This made a grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird" (Welty, 1971: 275).

The repeated tapping sound of the cane orchestrated with her steps possibly creates in Phoenix a meditative mood that helps her relax and rids her of the chaos inside her head. In the same vein, the sound of tapping is compared to the chirping of a solitary little bird, and bird song, according to Basquiat (n.d), has recently developed into a sound therapy for those experiencing the stress of noise pollution.

The connection between rhythmic patterns and relaxation is readily apprehended when Phoenix Jackson passes through the cotton field and into the field of dead corn. She vaguely sees something fluttering but she cannot discern its truth. From the way it flutters she first takes it to be a man dancing in the field:

She passed through the old cotton and went into a field of dead corn. It whispered and shook, and was taller than her head. 'Through the maze now,' she said, for there was no path. Then there was something tall, black, and skinny there, moving before her.
At first she took it for a man. It could have been a man dancing in the field (Welty, 1971: 279)

Knowing that she cannot trust the judgement of her eyes, she listens attentively for any sound that might give her a clue as to what this black and skinny thing might be. When she receives no answer, she takes it to be a ghost. Then still she wants to know what it is a ghost of.

But she stood still and listened, and it did not make a sound. It was as silent as a ghost.'Ghost,' she said sharply, 'who be you the ghost of? For I have heard of nary death close by. 'But there was no answer, only the ragged dancing in the wind (Welty, 1971: 283).

Having failed to decipher the truth of the ghost by both the senses of seeing and hearing, she resorts to the sense of touching; for more concentration she also shuts her eyes as she usually does in similar situations. She touches the thing which she has first mistaken for a man, and then for a ghost to find out that it is only a scarecrow. With the reality of the thing revealed, her fear is dissipated and she starts to dance with the scarecrow:

"She shut her eyes, reached out her hand, and touched a sleeve. She found a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice. Dance, old scarecrow,' she said, 'while I dancing with you.'(Welty, 1971: 279)

This dancing, which involves a rhythmic movement of the body, enhances relaxation and mindfulness, and represents a celebration of the feeling of safety and satisfaction.

CONCLUSION:

The present study explores the character of Phoenix Jackson in Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" . Firstly, this study tentatively identifies Phoenix Jackson's journey as a source of trauma in light of Kalsched's (2021) claim that trauma occurs when we experience more than we can bear

conscio usly, and suggests possible coping strategies that may be consciously or unconsciously used to alleviate stress, thereby preventing physical exhaustion. Secondly, the study considers the journey Jackson makes in quest of medicine for her ailing grandson, in spite of the physical aspect of her advanced age, as well as being poor, female and black. Thirdly, the study tracks Phoenix Jackson's actions and reactions as she encounters thorny bushes, water streams, barbed wire, scary animals, and other things in her environment, and a human world permeated by race, gender, and class divisions.

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