2002 First Place Critical Analysis

Eudora Welty on African American Women

On the fifteenth of September 1963, a white man was seen setting a box beneath the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The contents of the box: 122 sticks of dynamite. Minutes later, the makeshift bomb exploded, killing four young African American girls and injuring twenty-three other people. The white man, Robert Chambliss, paid a one hundred dollar fine for possessing dynamite without a permit. He was found not guilty of murder, and the case was added to a long list of "unsolved" bombings, police killings, and other acts of violence against the African American community.

This was the world in which Eudora Welty wrote. A native of the South, Welty witnessed racism and anti-Black violence-such as the infamous Birmingham Bombing-first hand. She saw the innocent injured and slain because of the color of their skin. She watched as Black men struggled and finally gained equality -and as Black women failed to be equal within the walls of their own homes. And was Eudora Welty silent? Or did she speak out against these wrongs? Critics accused Welty of ignoring politics in her work. "Some have questioned her … failure to lobby for the rights of blacks" (Ealy). However, Welty's portrayal of African American women in her stories highlights her belief that they were trapped in a world of injustice-a society controlled by whites and a culture dominated by men. Eudora Welty speaks through two characters, Phoenix and Livvie, and their dealings with different types of authority.

Welty emphasizes the hopeless situation of African American women through her characters' encounters with the authority of nature. She creates a world in which Black women are powerless; it is a world where piles of fallen leaves or the very thorns of a bush can seem to take hold of their lives. Livvie, a young Black girl who is married to an old, domineering Black man, feels suffocated by her husband's authority. In an attempt to escape his control, if only for a brief moment, she "steal[s] away" down the Natchez Trace (Welty 157). The language Welty uses to describe Livvie's walk through the Trace shows the seriousness of her actions. She must be secretive, lest Solomon catch her in her disobedience. Livvie, however, does not go far. As if to trap her in Solomon's presence, dead leaves on the ground reach "as high as her knees," and she feels "as if she [is wading] a river as she [goes]" (Welty 157-158). These leaves are almost hostile-her legs are "all scratched and bleeding" from the journey (Welty 158). Finally, Livvie gives up altogether, saying that "it [is] not like a road that [goes] anywhere" (Welty 158). Piles of leaves halt Livvie's attempted escape. It is as if nature is protesting her challenge of authority.

Another character, Phoenix Jackson, has a similar encounter with nature. In the first paragraph of "A Worn Path," Phoenix is described as "very old and small" (Welty 59). This description immediately alerts the reader to this black woman's weakened state. Despite this physical weakness, Phoenix is very determined. She makes regular trips into a town, located several miles from her home, in order to obtain medicine for her sick grandson. On one such trip, Phoenix walks into a thorny bush. The thorns catch her dress, impeding her progress. She tries over and over to free herself, but "before she [can] pull them free in one place they [are] caught in another" (Welty 60). Just as the thorns hinder Phoenix in her trip to town, society oppressed black women, impeding their progress toward equality. Though they may have tasted freedom or hope at times, they were in a constant struggle with society's thorns of injustice. After she finally pulls her dress free, Phoenix comes upon a dog, which startles her and knocks her into a ditch. Phoenix falls over "like a little puff of milkweed" (Welty 63). Welty uses this simile to show, once again, that black women were helpless when faced with authority. The dog
is infinitely more powerful than the old woman. As she lies in the ditch, Phoenix realizes that the "black dog come up out of the weeds to stall [her] off, and now he sitting on his fine tail, smiling" (Welty 63). Not only does the dog overpower Phoenix, it sits above her and smiles, manifesting its strength, while she lies in the ditch, vulnerable and weak. Once again, Welty highlights the bleak situation of African American women through her characters' dealings with nature.

Welty's characters are also faced with the authority of white women. Their relationships with these women illustrate Welty's belief that African American women lived in an unjust world. No sooner has Miss Baby Marie, a cosmetic saleswoman, entered Livvie's house than she begins to look for opportunities to criticize. Her eyes "[run] over the room," and she finally "turn[s] up her nose" and says of the décor, "it is not Christian or sanitary to put feathers in a vase" (Welty 162). Following this rude comment, Baby Marie opens a suitcase full of makeup and asks, haughtily, if Livvie has "ever [seen] so many cosmetics in [her] life" and whether or not she has "ever applied cosmetics" (Welty 162). She speaks condescendingly to Livvie, as if her fair skin and makeup render her superior to the young Black girl. Historically, the early nineteenth century found African American women struggling to "get as close to the white beauty standard as [they] possibly could" (Williams 5). Skin lighteners and brighteners were available and popular among Blacks (Newman 9). Due to the flawed opinions of society, many Black women felt that they were "the antithesis of what was considered beautiful" (Williams, 5). With this knowledge, Baby Marie tries to make Livvie feel less beautiful, and less human, than a white woman. When Baby Marie allows her to try a stick of lipstick, Livvie opens it and exclaims, excitedly, that it smells of chinaberry flowers. Baby Marie responds, "My cosmetics have secret ingredients-not chinaberry flowers" (Welty 163). This arrogant remark is meant to put Livvie in her place. Baby Marie wants her to feel unintelligent and inferior. In addition to this, when she realizes that Livvie has no money, she leaves in a "fuss of triumph," again displaying her superiority (Welty 164).

White women also look down upon Phoenix. When she finally arrives at the doctor's office in the town, Phoenix momentarily forgets why she has come. Eventually, she remembers the purpose of her journey and begins to apologize profusely, as if she has done something horribly wrong: "Phoenix was like an old woman begging … forgiveness for waking up frightened in the night" (Welty 67). She admits that she is "an old woman without an education." Phoenix herself feels inferior when compared with these white workers. Finally, a nurse tries to "hush" her (Welty 68). This language is similar to that used by a parent to quiet a noisy child. Just as a parent is an authoritative figure in a child's life, the nurse has authority over Phoenix. Also, before Phoenix leaves, a white attendant offers her a nickel. While this may seem like a charitable act on the surface, at its root it is nothing more than a display of her wealth. The attendant is merely reminding Phoenix of her inferior position in the world. Again, white women in Welty's stories display authority over African American women, emphasizing her belief that Black women lived in a world of inequality and discrimination.

Finally, Livvie and Phoenix are controlled by the authority of men, which again shows Welty's idea that African American women were trapped in an unfair world. Livvie's husband, Solomon, "[keeps] her in the house" (Welty 155). He has "never let Livvie go any farther than the chicken house and the well" on his property (Welty 160), "the cabins of the tenants [are] forbidden her" (Welty 157), and he will not allow anyone to see her. Livvie's life is dominated by Solomon's will. When he speaks, she "listen[s] and answer[s]" (Welty 155). Livvie makes no decisions of her own, and her life is centered on her husband, her master. She is, in fact, little more than a slave to him, and she takes pride in her ability to "keep from singing when she iron[s], and to sit by a bed and fan away the flies" (Welty 158). Welty's description of this working girl invokes images of "Mammy"—an early nineteenth century stereotype of the African American wife, "holding a child to her breast … scrubbing floors with a rag around her head" (Williams). In the words of Maxine Williams, "for such a one, who … [is] portrayed with her head to the floor and her behind facing the ceiling, it is ludicrous to conceive of any dominant role" (3). Rather, Livvie is subject to the dominance of her husband. In addition to Solomon, Cash serves as an authoritative male in Livvie's life. He is "so powerful that his presence [gives] her strength" (Welty 167). When they walk together, Cash kicks through flowers, "as if he could break through everything in the way and destroy anything in the world" (Welty 165). Livvie is in awe of his strength. In the final scene of the story, after Solomon's death, Cash "seize[s] her deftly as a long black cat and drag[s] her hanging by the waist round
and round him, while he turn[s] in a circle, his face bent down to hers" (Welty 170). His authority is further shown as he stands over her. He looks down on Livvie, and in his arms, she is "as unprotesting as a bird on a nest" (Welty 170). Livvie is powerless and weak in Cash's strong hold.

Phoenix also encounters the authority of men. A young white man, on his way home from town, finds the old woman lying in the ditch. As he pulls her out, he "[gives] her a swing in the air" (Welty 63). This action emphasizes his power over her. Phoenix, a black woman, is helpless against the strength of this man. He demonstrates his authority once more when he chases away the very dog that had startled her. The fact that he is more powerful than the dog, which easily overpowered Phoenix, again implies the man's supremacy. Welty uses this scene, as well as Livvie's relationships with Solomon and Cash, to underscore her belief that men, too, had authority over Black women. This furthered the inequality of their world.

Eudora Welty was not silent when it came to social issues. In her own, sometimes-quiet ways, she fought discrimination and racism and inequality. She voiced her opinions and beliefs. Her stories can speak loudly of the injustices of a tainted society, but these protests are only heard by those who immerse themselves in her work, by those who reach beneath the surface to find the true meaning of the subtle events that comprise her stories.

Works Cited


