



## The Characters of Children in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” and Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path”: A Comparative Study

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<b>Received:</b> 24/4/2021	<b>Abstract</b> <i>This article tries to compare between two well-known American short stories, “A Worn Path” by Eudora Welty and “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker, from a comparative perspective. The author of the first of these stories is an African-American novelist, short story writer, poet, and social activist. Alice Walker and the other story is written by an American short story writer, novelist and photographer, who wrote about the American South, Audra Welty. The specific reasons behind choosing these two short stories because they are written by women writers from different cultures, both deal with racial issues, but more importantly is that both include children characters that can add an attribution to be representations of the new African- American generation. Walker’s story includes the characters of two African- American daughters; Maggi and Dee, each of these characters behave in a different way, a behavior which consequently represents a special attitude towards the new generation of African- Americans. While in Welty’s story, we find the character of the grandson of the protagonist, Phoenix, who has a disease which deprived him from his ability to speak. This study analyses how these three characters provide different angles of seeing how the new generation of African- Americans is represented through a comparative outlook.</i>
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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Children characters are vital carriers of meanings and symbols in literature, especially in short story. Authors aim at different purposes through the child character in their works. One of the functions that a child character may represent is to symbolize the future. Carl G. Jung believes that the child motif signifies futurity. He suggests that “[o]ne of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is potential future.” (Jung 1969, p. 164). Through Jung’s vision of the child, this work is going to compare and contrast the child characters in the two short stories; Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path” (1941) and Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973). The first has one child character who will be compared with the two child characters in the second story.

Through a comparison among these child characters, this work argues that both authors, Eudora Welty and Alice Walker, have a positive as well as a negative outlooks towards the future of African Americans. The significance of this conclusion about the authors’ outlook towards the future of their people resides in the fact that it is formed out through a detailed analysis and comparison of both writers’ child characters, and not only through their clear and straightforward statements. In other words, we might say that these outlooks might be their unconscious thoughts that they have constructed through their short stories.

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Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" have been subjected to analysis and criticism by several critics of the genre who attempted a comparison or contrast between them. Patrick Mahoney, for example, wrote an essay (2007) comparing the characters of the protagonists in both stories. Other critics have discussed the theme of partnership or racism in both stories. For instance, Cindy Taylor (2019) discusses the possible death of the grandson from the perspective of reader-response theory. Sam Whitsitt (2000) studies the significance of the quilts in the story as well as in the African American society. However, there is no available work that studies the characters of children as symbols of hope in both stories from a comparative perspective. Thus, this work comes to continue what other critics have started or referred to by focusing on the characters of children.

Eudora Welty (1909-2001), was born in Jackson, Mississippi. She has been awarded several literary prizes including Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Optimist's Daughter* (1969). She wrote widely about the American South. Her short story "A Worn Path" has received a special concern from critics for its depth since it was published in 1941. "A Worn Path" tells the story of an old, African woman, Phoenix Jackson. The story is about the tough journey that Phoenix makes through in the woods of Mississippi to the town of Natchez 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 medicine, and making her way back home.

Alice Walker, born in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, a rural farming town. Her most celebrated work is the novel *The Color Purple* 1982. She is mainly concerned with themes tackling African- American culture and life. Her short story "Everyday Use", published in 1973, is widely researched and analyzed. "Everyday Use" is about an African woman and her two daughters, Maggie and Dee. It is told from the viewpoint of the first person omniscient narrator, the mother. There are no big events in the story, its meaning is rather symbolic. The whole story is about the visit Dee pays for her mother and sister, Maggie. The mother's narration gives us insight into the characters of Maggie and Dee who have different attitudes towards life and towards their heritage and identity as African- American young characters.

A comparison between these two stories can be made considering some aspects that may link them together. The two stories are written by female authors. Both stories include children characters, and the mother figure is well established in both of them. In Walker's story, the mother is described by herself, as she is the omniscient narrator, as "big- boned woman with rough, man working hands" (Walker, p. 89). Phoenix, in Welty's story, is also presented as a strong and determined woman who takes the risk, every year, and goes through a tough journey in the wood in order to get the medicine for her sick grandson. Both women appear to be dutiful and dedicated members in their family.

Another similar aspect between the two stories is that both tackle the issue of racism practiced against African- Americans in America. In Walker's story, Mom describes her fears when imagining herself "looking a strange white man in the eye" (Walker, p. 89). Phoenix is also treated in a racist manner by the hunter in the wood. Thus, both stories share some similarities which make them appropriate targets for comparison. Meanwhile, the authors of these two stories are somehow of different cultures. Alice walker is an African- American author while Eudora Welty is an American writer.

## 2. DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the way through which the characters of children are depicted as representations of the new generation and the future of African- Americans. While there are two characters of young daughters in Walker's story, Dee and Maggie, in Welty's story there is only one, somehow ambiguous, character of a child who is the grandson of Phoenix. It suggests that the character of the grandson in Welty's story has some aspects in common with each of the other two characters in Walker's story. The similarity between the character of the grandson and the character of Maggi is that both represent a shared viewpoint regarding the new generation of African- Americans. A glimpse of hope in the new generation can be seen through these two characters. The likeliness between these two characters is more explicit and clearer than the similarity between the character of Dee and that of the grandson.

The character of Dee represents the behavior of a group of African- Americans who tried to preserve their traditions and culture by superficial means, which may result in the death of their tradition or in its being reduced to appearances and superficial matters. A controversial issue here has something to do with the character of the grandson when compared to that of Dee. Because there is no explicit notion in the story, "A Worn Path", implying that his character represents the loss of hope in the new generation of African- Americans. However, one point cannot be ignored that a huge array of critics have been convinced in the argument that Phoenix' grandson is actually dead. In this respect, both characters, Dee and the grandson, symbolize the view which sees the new generation of African- Americans as a case of loss of hope.

In Walker's story both characters of children have names, the names even play a major role in the story. Maggie and Dee's voices are heard. However, the voice of Maggie is less apparent. In contrast, the grandson does not have a name, and he is referred to just as "the grandson" throughout the story. The voice of the grandson is unnoticed as we know about him only from the words of the other characters. Finally, the grandson is much younger than both Dee and Maggie. Each of these characterizations plays its role in the analysis of Walker's and Welty's depiction of the future through their child characters as we shall see further on in this work. The claimed similarities between the character of the grandson and the two other characters are to be discussed in the following few pages.

Walker's child characters are older than Welty's. Maggie and Dee are teens apparently while Welty's is an infant. Their ages influence the ways in which their behaviors are depicted by both authors and also the ways through which they can be analyzed. There are some personal characteristics that Walker attaches to Maggie and Dee. And they have thus the chance to talk for themselves in some instances. Phoenix's grandson does not have any personal characterization that makes his existence more abstract than Maggie and Dee. Yet, by returning to Jung's view of the child as a signifier of futurity: the abstract existence of both the grandson and the personal characterizations of the two sisters stand as a symbol of the future of African Americans. The importance of the character of the grandson is supported by Lois Welch who assumes that in many of Welty's short stories including "A Worn Path," "[d]ead or absent children weigh heavily in their stories" (2008, p. 17). Nonetheless, the main comparison is between the grandson on one hand and the characters of Dee and Maggie on the other. However, referring to the differences between the characters of Dee and Maggie is quite pertinent.

In order to understand how the character of Dee symbolizes the loss of hope in the new generation, we have to trace the role she plays in one of the main themes in the story which is heritage. The big difference between Maggie and Dee is how they try to preserve the African-American heritage, and eventually their identity, in totally different ways.

Dee continually tries to explicitly show that she is interested in her heritage from the moment she arrives at her mother's home till the end of the story. She starts to take pictures before greeting her mother and sister. So in this respect: "Documenting her rural roots means more to her than the roots themselves." (Joan Korenman 1994, p. 145). Mom says describing Dee's dress: "There are yellow and oranges... Earrings, too, gold and hanging down... Bracelets dangling" (p. 91). That is the kind of dress African women usually wear. Alice Walker "offers a devastating portrayal of a young woman whose ostensible regard for her heritage makes a blind adherence to shifting fashions and a callous disregard for her mother and sister" (Korenman, p. 145). This indicates that Dee is concerned to have a look that presents her in the society as a girl who is proud of her African identity.

The intention of Dee to change her name to 'Wangero Leewanika Kimono' also plays a vital role in showing aspects of her character. It is to be noted that "Nowhere is Dee's lack of real concern for her family" heritage more apparent than in her explanation of her change of name" (Korenman, p. 146). 'Wangero', as Dee claims, is an African name. She says that she "couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress" (Walker, p. 92) her. However, the mother who unarguably symbolizes the African identity could not pronounce the name which Dee chooses without hardship and training. The name is not familiar to her. Besides, the name 'Dee' is rooted in the family as the mother mentions several of their relatives who carried the name before Dee, for example, 'aunt Dici' and 'Grandma Dee'. David Cowart supports this saying that, "[i]n her name, her clothes, her hair, her sunglasses, her patronizing speech and her Black, Muslim companion Wangero proclaims a deplorable degree of alienation from her rural origins and family" (1996, p. 172). What we understand from this argument is that the interest of Dee is just in showing off that she is concerned with her African identity. However, it is clear that she ignores her roots as she refuses to be called by a name several of her relatives have been called by.

Another aspect that shows Dee's inclination in the superficial maintenance of her heritage appears through her desire to own things such as the 'churn top' which she wants to use "as a centerpiece for the alcove table" (Walker, p. 93) and the 'dasher' which she will think of something artistic to do with. This is all for the sake of artificial showing. On the other hand, her mother uses these same things for everyday use. The mother mentions that she has offered Dee quilts, a symbol of heritage, when she first went to college and Dee has refused to have them at that time claiming that they are "old-fashioned, out of style" (Walker, p. 94). However, as Dee sees these same quilts she struggles with her mother fiercely in order to allow her to have them. This time Dee wants to hang them at the wall. "Dee wants the quilts, not for 'everyday use', as their African American maker intended, but for objects of art to link her back to her African roots" (Harold Bloom 2009, p. 159). Again, Dee comes to be interested in the appearance and fashion not the essence of being proud of her identity.

Another relevant point which presents Dee as a superficial character is shown in her relationship with her mother. As an omniscient narrator, the mother begins the story talking about her everyday life with Maggie. In contrast, when she comes to mention Dee first, she imagines herself with her in a television program. "Mama waits for Dee like waiting for the advent of a goddess than her returning daughter." (Zhao Zhiliang 1992, p. 10) The mother believes that it is impossible for her to be in such a program. For the mother, Dee "is not someone familiar with but an alienated other, invading their peaceful life" (Zhiliang, p. 12). This implies that Dee's connection with her mother, as an alive example of African identity, is merely an illusion and a remote one even.

Through the character of Dee, we can glimpse one side of Walker's outlook towards the future of African-American, this is the desperate side. We may observe that "Walker makes sure that we recognize Dee's shallowness and egocentrism. But Walker aims her Criticism not just at one selfish individual but also at a black nationalism whose pursuit of the black heritage could in fact end up obliterating that heritage" (Korenman, p. 146). Dee is the African-American girl who understands that for one to be proud of her/ his culture and identity is to show them in appearances like names, clothes and things. She could not understand that she should have lived the way African-American, her mother and sister for example, live if she is really dutiful to her identity. Rather, she continuously claims that her mother and Maggie "don't understand" their heritage. Speaking briefly, the image which Dee paints as a young character represents a generation who will bring death to their heritage and identity when linking them to appearances only.

The character of Dee can be looked at and interpreted in this way, and thus it is to be compared with certain aspects of the character of the grandson in Welty's story. As indicated earlier, the comparison here is somehow controversial. This is because we are comparing what the character of Dee explicitly represents with one way of interpreting the character of the grandson. The idea that must be considered here is that the comparison is held on the basis that these characters as young ones, are, in one way or another, representations of the African-American future.

Some critics see that Phoenix' grandson is dead. Their suggestion is based on some allusive references in the text of the story. In this regard, it worth mentioning that Welty has written an essay entitled "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" attempting to answer the question of whether the grandson is dead or alive after being asked several times about this. She states: "[t]he story is told through Phoenix's mind as she undertakes her errand. As the author at one with the character as I tell it, I must assume that the boy is alive. As the reader, you are free to think as you like" (Welty, p. 219). Welty claims that the grandson's being alive or dead does not affect the story's meaning as a story with the explicit theme of love and duty. However, this point, in this respect, needs special and independent treatment as we are more concerned with the grandson as a representation of the future. Thus, the point of whether he is dead or alive is to be examined depending on the text, ignoring in this stage only, the author's intention.

It can be noticed that there are some proofs that indicate the death of the grandson. In a well-known essay, in this context, Roland Bartel thinks that:

The assumption that the grandson is dead helps to explain Phoenix Jackson's stoical behavior in the doctor's office. She displays a 'ceremonial stiffness' as she sits 'bolt upright' staring 'straight ahead, her face solemn and withdrawn into rigidity.' This passiveness suggests her psychological dilemma- she cannot explain why she made the journey. Her attempt to blame her lapse of memory on her illiteracy is unconvincing. Her lack of education is hardly an excuse for forgetting her grandson, but it goes a long way toward explaining her inability to articulate her subconscious motives for her journey. (1977, p. 289)

When Phoenix encounters a mysterious shape on her way, she takes it to be a ghost. Phoenix says: "Ghosts, who be you the ghost of? For I have heard of nary (no) death close by" (p. 324). It gives us a strong impression that in the sphere of the story it is believed that when someone is dead, it is expected to see his/her ghost. Depending on this outlook, it can be claimed that the boy which phoenix imagines and reacts with (p. 323) in her way through the wood is the ghost of her grandson. This would indicate that the grandson is really dead.

In an essay entitled "Parting the Curtain of Lye Poisoning in 'A Worn path'," Melissa Stang maintains that:

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The issue of accidental lye poisoning has perhaps not received the critical attention it deserves...Esophageal injuries from swallowing the caustic chemical known as lye occurred frequently among children, especially in rural areas like the one from which Phoenix begins her journey. What also rings true is the result of swallowing lye: not instant death from poisoning but a scarred esophagus that might immediately, or later, swell and constrict so that a child could neither eat nor drink. In many cases, the unpredictable swelling of the throat in a child who had previously swallowed lye caused the child to slowly waste away from starvation and dehydration. (2009, p. 2)

In the story, Phoenix states that the grandson has swallowed the Lye from at least "two, three years ago" (Welty, p. 327). Considering this fact in the light of what Sprang has claimed indicates that it is not reasonable to think that the grandson is still alive.

Taking into consideration this interpretation of the character of the grandson and looking at him as dead recalls to us a similar aspect of his character with the character of Dee. On the one hand, Dee represents the loss of African tradition as she treats them in a superficial way. On the other hand, the grandson represents the loss of hope in the new generation of Africans, when he is believed to be dead. Lois M. Welch suggests in this regard that Welty's "dead or absent children remind us of a place outside presence and life" (p. 20). From this viewpoint, we realize that the characters of Dee and the grandson are unpromising and bear a negative outlook towards the future.

Moving to the similarities between the character of the grandson and that of Maggie, we could say that the comparison here is more tangible and clearer than the previous one. One of these similarities is that both have some kind of physical illness or want caused by an external factor. The scars of Maggie resemble the grandson's illness. And both defects are significant in interpreting their characters.

From the beginning of Walker's story, the mother mentions Maggie's scars. We know that these scars were caused by the fire that burned their other house. It is quite apparent that these scars affect Maggie's personality and life. She continually tries to hide her scars. The burned home may be interpreted as a symbol of the African- Americans reality and past. When Mom mentions the scene of the fire, she describes the reaction of both Dee and Maggie. Maggie appears as affected gravely by the scene which indicates that she is a character who is closely linked to her reality, regardless of how ugly it is. Mom says describing Maggie's reaction: "Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them" (p. 90). In contrast, Dee seemed happy by the incident as "She had hated the house that much" (p. 90). An important point here is that Maggie's scars are everlasting and they will accompany her throughout her life.

On the other hand, while the grandson is not mentioned until the end of the story, almost every reference to him in the story is about his illness. We know that he has swallowed lye, a chemical soap used for cleaning purposes. He consequently loses his voice. Moreover, the whole motif of the story and the motivation behind Phoenix' journey is the grandson's need for medicine. In the clinic, the nurse tells Phoenix that her grandson's illness is "an obstinate case" (p. 327) and she presupposes that he is already dead. Thus, both characters, the grandson and Maggie have an everlasting illness or want.

The interpretation that these characters' wants intensify is that both are vital examples and representations of African-Americans. Their suffering symbolizes the greater suffering of African Americans. They carry in their bodies the hardship and the anguish exercised upon their own people. Beside their pains, both characters represent some kind of hope on the new generation of African- Americans.

Before going further in the argument that the character of the grandson represents hope, it should be noted that one may ask how the character of the grandson can carry hope while he is assumed or felt to be dead. Nevertheless, it is not stated directly in the story whether he is dead or not. Accordingly, we can have both probabilities at hand and both could be proved by references in the text itself. It has been assumed earlier in this work that the grandson represents loss of hope in the new generation. This assumption is valid only when he is believed or considered to be dead. Thus, our study does not prefer one assumption over the other, it rather take this matter as an open one and links each assumption with a different character from Alice's story.

Both Maggie and the grandson's relationships with the mother or grandmother are significant to the assumption that they represent a source of hope. Speaking generally, Mom in Walker's story and Phoenix in Welty's story can be regarded as representations of the African-American endurance and identity. Consequently, the close and affectionate relationships between Maggie and her mother on one hand, and between the grandson and phoenix on the other are significant. Maggie and the grandson are close to their roots and identity. Thus, they are expected to carry hope for African- Americans because their attachment to their identity means that they will preserve it.

Another similar aspect of the characters of the grandson and Maggie is the way they are regarded by the mothers or grandmother. When Dee asks Mom to have the quilts, she says that she has preserved them for Maggie. But, Maggie says that Dee can have them. Mom comments on Maggie's reaction as follows: "This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work" (p. 94). Mom's comment presents Maggie as a character who is satisfied with her share in life, so she has the virtue of giving. Maggie says: "I can 'member grandma Dee without the quilts" (p. 94). She does not want the quilts for artificial purposes as the case is with Dee, she rather wants to use them. "Maggie has the power to piece together the history that these quilts represent. She can literally write history through quilting." (Matthew Mullins 2013, p. 45) However, she claims that she could do so without the quilts, it is because she becomes the roots themselves.

As for the grandson, the way Phoenix has him in mind represents him as strong character. When the nurse claims that the case of the grandson is 'obstinate', Phoenix responses "[h]e suffers and it don't seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last" (p. 327). This quotation is indicative because it reflects the way the old generation is regarding the new one. Phoenix believes that her grandson has pains but it does not mean for her that he is weak. Phoenix intends to buy a 'paper windmill' for him. Kevin Moberly suggests that "the two dominant symbols of freedom in the story, the songbird and the sweet water of the spring, come together in Phoenix's assertion that her grandson is "going to last"" (2005, p. 124-125). Phoenix asserts that she will hold the windmill 'straight up' in her hand. This windmill implies that there is still a place for hope and renewal.

Eventually, it is apparent that the characters of the grandson, from one angle, and Maggie are presented in an optimistic way. With her 'scarred hands', Maggie "can always make some more" quilts (p. 94). And despite his illness, the grandson will remain there. As long as Phoenix is determined to make her journey to the clinic, the grandson could be considered alive. "Welty directs our focus, instead, to the fact that Phoenix is alive and has been successful in her errand carried out in love" (James Saunders 1992, p. 70). The characters of Maggie and the grandson, if considered to be alive, they still represent the positive perspectives Welty and Walker have towards the future generation of African Americans. Both characters carry the sufferings of their people with them. It is thus noted that the "grandson's injury is representative of the African American condition" (Kevin Moberly, p. 111). They present a continuation of the their

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predecessors; Maggie can still sew quilts as her mother and grandmother did, and the grandson can still make it despite his illness just as Phoenix endures hardships every year to bring medicine for him.

### 3. CONCLUSION

We can notice how the close examination of a character in the small world of the story gives us insight into what it represents in the larger world of reality. We can also notice how the two authors from somehow different cultures and days were able to present works or analogical characters to a considerable extent. However, while Walker chooses consciously to present two different viewpoints by depicting two different characters; Welty unconsciously presents two different viewpoints by presenting only one character. In such a way, both authors came to portray the characters of children in their stories.

These different artistic perspectives reflect the situation and prospects of African Americans in the years to come after the publication of both stories. In effect, these two perspectives were realized in the reality of African Americans. The positive outlook is manifested through the procedures taken to improve the lives of African Americans: for instance, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited racial discrimination in the various social realms. And the negative outlook was present in the mistreatment and discrimination that some people practice against African Americans as well as people with dark complexion.

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### **AUTHOR'S BIO**

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