Welty, “A Worn Path”: my (instructor’s) notes

BPL 4 pg. 365 An anti-hero story with subtle suggestions throughout of classical heroes and their great quests, e.g., Odysseus, Aeneas, Jason, Knights of King Arthur’s round table, Roland, Jesus, and even of Cervantes’ classical literary mock heroic anti-hero Don Quixote (10-cent paper toy windmill for grandson, 372)

Phoenix Jackson’s “heroic” qualities and values

1. Perseverance (Faulkner’s “endurance”) in the face of what to her were enormous obstacles to her great and repeated quests (classical heroes usually had to do it only one time)
2. Sense of social obligation:
   a. She thanks each person who helps her
   b. Unlaced shoes okay in the country, “but wouldn’t look right to go in a big building” 370t
3. Sense of personal and social obligation: “neat and tidy” 366t
4. Sense of Christian moral obligation: keeping the hunter’s lost nickel, knowing it was wrong (“God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing.” 369b). Passing bird a symbol of God watching? If bird=God, then what has the hunter been killing?

Phoenix’s Obstacles (the Antagonist)

1. Climate “frozen” 365 (Christmas season)
2. Age “old” 365; “I the oldest people I ever know.” 367b
3. Size “small” 365; and surrounded by words like frail
4. Clothing unlaced, potentially tripping shoelaces 366t
5. Animals foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals” 366t; bulls, snakes, and a two-headed snake delusion 367m; alligators 368t
6. The pine woods “deep and still” 366m
7. Topography “hill” 366
8. Flora (plants) “thorny bush” 366b
9. Eyesight “old eyes” 366b “distrusted her eyesight” 370t
10. Physical balance log across creek 366/7 “
11. Dementia boy brings her cake 367t; after not answering nurse’s question, snaps out of it: “It was my memory had left me.” 371m
12. Barbed wire fence 367t
13. Fear of death symbols “dead trees” “withered cotton fields” buzzard, dead corn rows
14. Natural vision obstruction high, opaque and dense corn field “taller than her head”367m
15. Fear of the dead “ghost, …who be you the ghost of?” (addressing a scarecrow) 367b
16. Swamp hides alligators 368t
17. Darkness of ravine “dark as a cave” 368m Land of the dead section in epics.
19. Ravine, ditch 368b20
20. Hunter pointing his gun at her 369b (climax of entire story).
21. poverty the nickel 369b

22. Physical inflexibility In Natchez, the stairs to the hospital building “tower of steps” 370m

23. Treatment by authority the attendant: “A charity case, I suppose” “Speak up, Grandma” “Are you deaf?” 370b Condescension: “It’s Christmas time, Grandma,” said the attendant, “Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?” 372

The white young hunter: He could save her life (lifting her out of the ditch) but he could also lie to her (claimed no money in his pocket) and kill her (pointing his gun at her) 369b. Thus, his message was that he and his race were like God with the power of life and death over the black people. Also suggests the Roman power that threatened Jesus with death.

The story as Christian allegory. The Christmas shopper, supposedly a well-off white lady, puts down her Xmas gifts (wealth) to kneel and tie Phoenix’s shoelaces. Suggests the Magii; others kneeling at Jesus’ feet.

The total obstacles climaxing in the hunter pointing the gun at Ph. suggest Jesus’ various obstacles with him also faced with death (Herod’s order to kill the children, Satan’s temptations in the wilderness, Jesus’ arrest, trial and judgement of death, Calvary and the stations of the cross).

Time of the story: Christmas, Jesus’ birthday

The Christian Resurrection theme.

1 “dead” in the ditch, Ph. comes alive again via the hunter’s rescue.
2 Lazarus raised from the dead by Jesus

A type of pre-Christian resurrection myth from ancient Greece had the Phoenix bird rise anew from the ashes left after it was totally consumed by fire.