

The Child Who Favored Daughter Study Guide

The Child Who Favored Daughter by Alice Walker

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Child Who Favored Daughter Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
The Child Who Favored Daughter.....	3
Characters.....	6
Objects/Places.....	7
Themes.....	8
Style.....	10
Quotes.....	11
Topics for Discussion.....	15



The Child Who Favored Daughter

The Child Who Favored Daughter Summary

The story begins with a young girl who is dropped off by a school bus and is walking the rest of the way home. She sees her father on the front porch and instantly knows that he has read the letter she has written to her white lover. She is terrified of her father's reaction but forces herself to appear calm. She briefly wonders who could have given her father the letter: her lover's mother in an attempt to "preserve the race?" the wife of her lover, perhaps discovering it among her husband things? perhaps her lover himself? The last idea, thought, she refuses to entertain, because she loves him.

The father sits on the porch with a shotgun nearby and the letter. He watches his daughter walking home and he knows that *she* knows he has the letter. As he is waiting, he reminisces about when he was a boy.

He had a sister they called "Daughter." She was beautiful and he loved her intensely. She was loving and giving to everyone. She would give anybody anything she had and was bad at keeping anything, even her own health. He would beg her not to go out but to stay with him. She laughed at him and told him she went where she was needed and would sleep here and there. This finally culminated when she left for months with someone else's husband. This devastated him and he cried and grieved a long time, for she had given her love to the same white man in whose fields he worked, the white man who treated him more like an animal than a human. To her family, this was a major betrayal; when she came back months, later they punished her for it.

When Daughter did come back, she was a broken woman. Her long hair was gone, her teeth were loose, and she did not recognize anyone. She would have fits of screaming and singing and would tell them she was on fire. Her family tied her down to her bed so that she was at their mercy. As punishment for her betrayal, they ostracized her until she could no longer feel her own pain. After time passed and she still didn't die, the family would throw food to her as if they were feeding scraps to the dogs. At night when she howled like an animal, her father would beat her with his belt until she stopped.

Despite this, Daughter continued to exploit her brother's love for her, and finally, when she was almost her old self again, she begged him to free her. He was afraid she would run away again and leave him. His love for her turned into loathing and a need to seek revenge on his white master, her lover. Daughter climbed out of the bed and knocked her brother out. She was later found dead, impaled on a fence post.

He had never recovered from the pain and shock of Daughter giving her love to the white man who held him in bondage. He felt he could not forgive her for this. His mind became poisoned and his perspective changed to expect evil and deception to come to him.



Due to his past, he hated the women in his life and was very distrustful of them. He treated the worst the women who loved him the most. He beat his own wife until she was crippled, in order to keep her from returning advances from the white landlord (advanced that he was only imagining). His wife was able to escape his cruelty by killing herself, but not before she had his daughter. He believed his daughter had the same looks and character as his sister "Daughter," and the letter he now held seemed to prove this to him.

When his daughter finally comes up to him at the porch, he calls her a "white man's slut!" She leads the way to the shed where he throws her on the ground and beats her with a harness. She does not resist even as the buckles of the harness make her bleed. He leaves her in the shed and returns to the front porch. It has started to rain. He picks up his gun and rocks it like a baby and looks at the now rain-soaked letter. He can still make out where she has written "I love you," and he is enraged. He thinks that the lover has probably left his daughter to marry one of his own race. He feels jealousy and again feels that, like Daughter, his own daughter won't ever belong to him.

The next morning he stares at a picture of Daughter, turns it over and in resignation picks up a pocket knife and takes it to the shed with him. He finds his child awake and waiting for him on the ground. He realizes that she is *his* daughter and not the "Daughter" of his past. It is then that he begs her to deny ever writing the letter. His daughter, however, will not deny the letter; she stands up and tells him she is leaving. He strikes her down. She gazes up at her father, her blouse having fallen off and leaving her chest bare. He gathers her breasts and fondles them. As the dogs start barking he is suddenly filled with desire. In his anguish, he pulls himself away from her, then cuts off her breasts with his pocketknife. He flings the breasts at the dogs to eat.

The day finds him sitting on his front porch again with his eyes closed. He hears the yellow school bus approach and imagines what he would see if he opens his eyes, his sister or his own daughter. He has the gun on the porch beside him and knows that if he wants he can pick the unloaded gun up and rock it like a baby.

The Child Who Favored Daughter Analysis

In *The Child Who Favored Daughter*, Walker's underlying theme is the black man's fear of abandonment and betrayal by black women for the white man, who is seen as the black man's oppressors. In response to this fear, the black man distrusts and mistreats the black women who love them. It is their own feelings of impotence and anger that feed their jealousies and make them become the masters and oppressors of their black women. Walker portrays this theme in this incestuous, gory short story.

It begins with a black father's discovery of his daughter's affair. He finds out that his own daughter is writing love letters to and having an affair with a married white man. In the father's eyes, this is the ultimate betrayal his daughter can perform. It reminds him of his own sister's betrayal when he was still a boy. He intensely loved his sister and she exploited and rejected that love in favor of his white master. His sister runs away with



his married, white master. Later, his sister returns as a broken woman, physically and mentally, due to her white lover's mistreatment of her. The brother cannot overcome his sister's betrayal or the hurt it caused. He is angry at his master for how he treated his sister and angry that his sister would give her love to the same white man who treated him like an animal. The family ostracizes her and beats her in punishment for what she has done. She ends up escaping and killing herself.

This incident scars the father for the rest of his life and poisons his view and treatment of the black women in his life. He distrusts and mistreats his wife, though she has not done anything wrong. He feels jealous of imagined advances from their white landlord to his wife. He becomes her oppressor and beats her until she is crippled, so that she cannot leave him for the white landlord. His wife's only escape is to kill herself, which she does.

His wife leaves behind a daughter, who reminds him of his sister (whose nickname was "Daughter"). His real daughter resembles "Daughter" in appearance and now in her actions. Due to the circumstances being similar and both being referred to as "Daughter," the father confuses the two and ends up punishing his daughter not only for her own betrayal but of "Daughter's" betrayal as well. The father comes to his senses and realizes that his child is not his sister and pleads with her to deny the letter. His daughter refuses, for she is in love, and tells her father she is leaving. The refusal and her intent to leave help seal the young girls' fate. The father strikes her down and sees her bare breasts, then is overcome with desire, not for her, but for what she represents: the black woman. However, his deeply rooted mistrust for black women causes him to cut off her breasts and feed them to the dogs, thereby destroying her femininity and her womanliness. In the end, the father is alone with only his memories and fantasies.



Characters

Father

A black father who is outraged and overcome with memories of his dead sister, after discovering his daughter's affair with a married white man. The father was in love with his sister and his love becomes a source of agony when she runs away with his white master and becomes that man's lover. This event poisons him the rest of his life toward all women. He is hateful, scornful, and distrustful of women. He treats the worst the women who love him the most. Due to his unfounded jealousy, he beat his wife until she was crippled. His wife ends up killing herself to escape him. His daughter reminds him of his sister in looks and personality; although his sister is dead, he gets the two confused. Her father kills her in the end, his jealousy too much for him to handle.

"Daughter" (the father's sister)

"Daughter" is the nickname of the father's sister. She was pretty, giving, and loving. She gave her love freely to all who wanted it except her brother. She falls in love and runs off with a married white man. Her lover is the master whom her brother works for, and he is treated worse than a dog. "Daughter" returns months later physically and mentally broken. Her hair has fallen out, her teeth are loose. She has screaming and singing fits. She is cunning and exploits her brother's love for her. When she first came back her family tied her to a bed, where they beat and ostracized her. She ends up escaping and kills herself by impaling herself on a fence post.

Daughter

A school-age black girl whose lover is a white man who already has a wife. She has written a letter to her lover telling him that she loves him. She is a lovely girl who strongly resembles "Daughter," her father's sister. She is often silent and takes pleasure in simple things like flowers. Although she is terrified of her father, she is unrepentant and will not deny her love for the white married man. She refuses to face the possibility that her lover may have betrayed her by providing her father with her letter.



Objects/Places

The letter

A love letter written by the father's daughter to her married white lover. In the letter the daughter proclaims her love. The father is given the letter; thereby finding out about his daughter's affair.

The shed

The shed is where the father takes his daughter for her beating. The father leaves her in the shed overnight and kills her there.



Themes

Racism/Sexism

The dominant theme present throughout this collection is about black women who long to escape and be free but who are denied that freedom by the society they live in and by their husbands. Black men are portrayed in a negative light and are made to be the oppressors of black women.

In *Roselily*, the story foreshadows two ways in which the bride, Roselily, will be oppressed by her new husband: the marriage itself, which leads her to think of chains, ropes, and religion; and in her role as a wife, where her groom has already made clear that he is going to remake her into the wife that he wants. In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Alice Walker continues to explore this theme of black men as the oppressors of black women. Not only does Myrna have to deal with racism she faces living in the South, she also has to deal with her husband's and lover's sexism. This story illustrates how Myrna is not allowed to write by her husband, Ruel, and has to continually write in secret and deny herself from developing her stories. In *The Welcome Table*, the old black woman experiences both racism and sexism when she is kicked out of the church, and in *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, Hannah's ordeal with racism results in the starvation of her children.

Darkness of Marriage

Although the entirety of *Roselily* takes place during a wedding ceremony, Walker manages to inject darkness into this supposedly happy occasion. *Roselily* pictures Chicago as a place with black specks falling from the sky. By the end of the story, Roselily feels like there is a trapped rat in her mind scurrying to and fro. In this way, Walker injects the feeling of darkness into an event usually viewed and portrayed as happy. Walker continues to present marriage in a dark way; in *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Walker portrays the wife, Myrna, as feeling like a bought possession and having the heart of a slave, and in *Her Sweet Jerome*, the narrator is abused by her husband, while she, in turn, is obsessively jealous. Walker's view of a black marriage is imbued with darkness.

Denial of Happiness/One's True Self

Walker explores the idea of one's denial of true happiness and/or one's true self in a variety of ways. In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Myrna denies her true passion-writing-which eventually leads to her breakdown. In *Everyday Use*, Dee tries to embrace what she believes is her heritage but ultimately denies her true history. Rannie of *Strong Horse Tea* denies the power of the remedies of her black ancestors until it is too late. In *The Diary of an African Nun*, we see the black woman's denial of her own desires in order to do her duty as a wife and do the will of her husband. However, in this case the



woman is a nun and the husband is Christ and the Catholic church. Finally, in *They Drink the Wine in France*, the French Professor denies himself the beauty he seeks in his young student Harriet because her beauty reminds him of a painful past when he was once in a concentration camp. On the other hand, Harriet denies herself happiness because she feels unworthy to match the French Professor on an intellectual level. In the end, both part ways and nothing in their lives is better for having come into contact with one another. All of these stories express the futility of denying oneself and the despair that this denial causes.



Style

Point of View

In *The Child Who Favored Daughter*, Walker uses third-person narration to tell the story. The point of view changes in this story several times. In the beginning of the story it gives the young daughter's perspective and then changes to the father's perspective. However, for the majority of the story, the father's point of view is portrayed.

Setting

The setting for this story is somewhere in the South at the father's home. The beginning of the story tells of the daughter walking down the lane to her house after a school bus has dropped her off. Her father is waiting for her on the porch. She encounters flowers on her walk home. The action takes place at the front porch or in the shed.

Language and Meaning

In *The Child Who Favored Daughter*, Walker surrounds the daughter with various blooming flowers and has the father look at his daughter's blooming figure. In contrast, Walker has the father surrounded by a shotgun, insects swarming over his head, and has him accompanied by dogs or standing in the rain. Walker's depiction of the daughter serves to make the final scene, in which the father cuts off her breasts and feeds them to the dogs, all the more gory and horrific.

Structure

Walker tells this tale in three chapters. In the chapters themselves, Walker breaks up the flow of the story with excerpts of a poem. Unlike Walker's other stories where this technique of using phrases to break up and guide the story's direction is effective, in *The Child Who Favored Daughter*, it can be disruptive by interfering with the flow of the story.



Quotes

These quotes are taken from all of the short stories featured in the book, Flowers.

"She dreams; dragging herself across the world." (pg. 3)

"A squeeze around the flowers in her hands chokes off three and four and five years of breath." (pg. 6)

"She wonders what one does with memories in a brand-new life." (pg. 8)

"She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes." (pg. 11)

"But I fit into my new surroundings perfectly; like a jar of cold cream melting on a mirrored vanity shelf." (pg. 13)

"I console myself with this thought: My family tends to darken and darken as we get older. One day he may wake up in bed with a complete stranger." (pg. 15)

"Every time he tells me how peculiar I am for wanting to write stories he brings up having a baby or going shopping, as if these things are the same. Just something to occupy my time." (pg. 15)

"Now Ruel will find that I am not a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees. The moment of my deliverance is at hand!" (pg. 18)

"This hobby of his she heartily encouraged, relegating reading to the importance of scanning the funnies; and besides, it was something he could do at home, if she could convince him she would be completely silent for an evening, and, of course, if he would stay." (pg. 28,29)

"A final crack-up in her own home was impossible, she reasoned contemptuously, for she did not think her husband's lover bold enough to show herself on his wife's own turf." (pg. 30)

"She was panting and sweating, her ashen face slowly coloring with the belated rush of doomed comprehension." (pg. 33)

"The heat from the sun is oppressively hot but she does not feel its heat so much as its warmth, for there is a cold spot underneath the hot skin of her back that encloses her heart and reaches chilled arms around the bottom cages of her ribs." (pg. 36)

"Not treated as a man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast." (pg. 38)



"He could not forgive her the love she gave that knew nothing of master and slave." (pg. 39)

"Jealousy is being nervous about something that has never, and probably won't ever, belong to you." (pg. 42)

"She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her." (pg. 47)

"I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog." (pg. 48)

"Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks." (pg. 49)

"When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet." (pg. 58)

"I can survive as long as I need with the bitterness that has laid every day in my soul." (pg. 67)

"I pray that the sun shall not shed its rays on them in benevolence, but instead it shall beat down on them and burn them and destroy them." (pg. 71)

"I was moved by the fervor with which Mrs. Kemhuff prayed. Often she would clench her fists before her closed eyes and bite the insides of her wrists as the women do in Greece." (pg. 72)

"And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known." (pg. 81)

"Those who knew the hesitant creeping up on them of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church, and saw an invasion of privacy, which they struggled to believe they still kept." (pg. 82)

"She had looked at that picture for more years than she could remember, but never once had she really expected to see him." (pg. 85)

"His little eyes were partly open, as if he were peeping out of his hard wasted skull at the chilly room, and the forceful pulse of his breathing caused a faint rustling in the sheets near his mouth like the wind pushing damp papers in a shallow ditch." (pg. 89)

"Her deep sharp eyes set in the rough leather of her face had aged a moist hesitant blue that gave her a quick dull stare like a hawk's." (pg. 89)



"Gently she began to examine him, all the while moaning and humming some thin pagan tune that pushed against the sound of the wind and rain with its own melancholy power." (pg. 94)

"And the gorilla's feet, powerful and large and twitching with impatience, were the last things he saw before he was hurled out of the violent jungle of the world into nothingness and a blinding light." (pg. 105)

"He was not comfortable with the X, however, because he began to feel each morning that the day before he had not existed." (pg. 107)

"She might have been a spectacularly striking figure, with her cropped fluffy hair and her tall, statuesque body-her skin was good and surprisingly the scarification marks played up the noble severity of her cheekbones-but her eyes were too small and tended to glint, giving her a suspicious, beady-eyed look, the look of pouncing, of grabbing hold." (pg. 111)

"How long must I sit by my window before I lure you down from the sky? Pale lover who never knew the dance and could not do it!" (pg. 115)

"I bear your colors, I am in your livery, I belong to you. Will you not come down and take me! Or are you even less passionate than your father who took but could not show his face?" (pg. 115)

"In this way will the wife of a loveless, barren, hopeless Western marriage broadcast the joys of an enlightened religion to an imitative people." (pg. 118)

"She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment." (pg. 119)

"Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream." (pg. 119)

"When she passes him at the door his heart flutters like old newspapers in a gutter disturbed by a falling gust of wind." (pg. 122)

"The same camp that gobbled up his wife and daughter and made fertilizer from their bones." (pg. 125)

"She brings the odor of Southern jails into class with her, and hundreds of aching, marching feet, and the hurtful sound of the freedom songs he has heard from the church, the wailing of souls destined for bloody eternities at the end of each completely maddened street." (pg. 127)

"His ability to be drunk and sober at the same time made him an ideal playmate, for he was as weak as we were and we could usually best him in wrestling, all the while keeping a fairly coherent conversation going." (pg. 131)



"I was almost in tears, for these deaths upset me fearfully, and the thought of how much depended on me and my brother (who was such a ham most of the time) made me very nervous." (pg. 133)

"He was like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which finally fell." (pg. 137)



Topics for Discussion

These topics concern all of the short stories featured in the book, Flowers.

Why does Roselily go through with the wedding despite having misgivings and doubts about her future?

Will Roselily find her freedom in her new life?

If Myrna did not love Mordecai why does his using and betraying her lead to her breakdown?

Why hasn't Myrna already left Ruel? Why doesn't she leave him now?

Why does the narrator tolerate Jerome's abuse and treatment of her?

Why does the narrator become obsessed with Jerome's fictitious lover and not have anger toward or threaten Jerome?

Why didn't the father follow through on his original plan to just scare his daughter into chastity with his voice or threaten her with his shotgun?

Why didn't his daughter deny she had written the letter and deny her love in order to save her life?

Why does the mother ultimately decide to give the quilts to Maggie and not to Dee/Wangero?

Maggie and Dee/Wangero both have a different way of preserving their heritage. What are their differing ways and which way is better?

Why does Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley continue to fear the rootworkers even after Hannah Kemhuff's death?

Despite Miss Sadler's/Mrs. Holley's protestations, does she believe in the power of the rootworkers?

Why did the old woman go to the "white" church instead of a "black" church?

Did Jesus really appear to the old woman or was she having a delusion?

Would Snooks have lived if Rannie Toomer allowed Sarah to attempt her home remedies sooner?

Would the mailman have acted any differently if Rannie's appearance were different and she were more intelligent?

Why do John's father's last thoughts center around his first wife and their son?



Why doesn't John show more interest in or even anger at his father?

Why doesn't the African nun forsake her vows and instead become a regular woman again, able to marry and have children?

By the end of the story, is the African nun still a true believer in the Catholic church's teachings?

Why was Myop unafraid at her discovery of the dead man?

Why did the remains of the hanging rope (and not the sight of the dead man itself) compel Myop to lay down her flowers?

Why don't Harriet and the French professor act on their desires for one the other?

Why does the French professor suffer at the realization of beauty?

Despite Mr. Sweet's being an alcoholic who was always drunk around the children, why did the family view him "like a piece of rare and delicate china"?

Why were so many of the "revivals" successful and why wouldn't they work on anyone else?