

The Diary of an African Nun Study Guide

The Diary of an African Nun by Alice Walker

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The Diary of an African Nun

The Diary of an African Nun Summary

This short story is written as a woman's six diary entries, all concerning her role as an African nun—that is, the wife of Christ. The first entry depicts how she is viewed by different nationalities that use the mission school as a hotel at night. All people are curious as to why a young and beautiful woman has become a nun. The Americans do not understand her humility, and they overly tip and smile at her; the Germans offer her praise, regard her as a primitive work of art and leer at her; the French find her charming; and the Italians hardly spare her a glance. The African nun sees herself as a wife of Christ, a celibate martyr and saint, and a wife of the Catholic church. She has spent all of her life in the same village that was "civilized" by missionaries, a village that is within walking distance from the mountains that are almost always covered in snow, except for in the spring.

The second diary entry recalls that when she was a girl, she looked up to and admired the nuns and priests at her school. Back then, she did not realize they could not have children, because they seemed so productive and passionate about their way of life. At age 20, she becomes a nun, which entails her wearing the white garb designated to nuns, hiding her femininity from the world. She compares the whiteness of the robe to the white snow on the mountains that surround her. She sees how boys she knew as a child treat her with gentle kindness. They are married now and she watches them kiss their children.

The third diary entry tells of her seven o'clock bedtime and how she hears the drumbeats outside her window and the festive chants around the fire. She implies that out there amidst the festivities, lovemaking will occur. The African nun longs to make love to her husband, Christ; she wants to lure him down from the sky where her impatient body awaits. She feels her passion is stifled underneath her nun's robes, which she again compares to snow. She questions if Jesus is less passionate than God, who had his son through Mary.

The fourth diary entry depicts in more detail what goes on outside her window every night. There is silence while they eat the freshly cooked goat's meat, tearing into it with their mouths and drinking wine. At midnight, a young girl dressed in black will join them, having decided to be like them. She will begin to dance and pick out her lover from a crowd; they will dance together and it will culminate into the ripping off of clothes and making love, forgetting the watching crowd.

The fifth diary entry reveals that the African nun is questioning the celibate and barren aspects of her marriage to God. She wonders if in heaven the joy of lovemaking and having babies is as intense and rewarding as it is on earth. She knows others would question whether she is truly converted and ask her if satisfying her carnal desires is worth giving up Christ. She knows if she answered honestly it would mean her having to



wait another thousand years for her husband. However, she believes she would counter this argument with one of her own: the African nun would tell her husband that it is when the snow melts from the mountains in the spring that the mountains are most productive and of use for bearing fruit; people plant their crops in the soil of the mountain and it sustains them. The resulting crop is good and abundant.

The African nun sees parallels in her life: she with her childless marriage, as compared to the snow-covered mountains, useless, a waste to herself and others. If this is how it should be, then Christ is dead according to her way of thinking. This is because to her, barrenness represents death and only the devoutly faithful do not realize it. She knows that she will probably say and do nothing about her childless marriage to Christ and continue in his ministry, despite her contradictory belief that participating in life's dance may bear more fruit. She will continue in silence even though her heart longs for love and children. Her mission is to silence the dance of life on earth and focus people on how to die. She will turn lovers into dead men and babies into mere longings and sadness for women that occur when reminded of the renewal of life in the spring.

The sixth entry concisely sums up the African nun's life and duties: "In this way will the wife of a loveless, barren, hopeless Western marriage broadcast the joys of an enlightened religion to an imitative people."

The Diary of an African Nun Analysis

In *The African Nun*, Alice Walker once again incorporates one of her recurring themes, the black woman's denial of her own personal desire in order to perform her duty as a wife and bend to the will of her husband. However, in this case, the woman is a nun and the husband is Christ and the Catholic church.

The African nun longs to know Christ as a lover and give birth to children. However, her desire is in direct conflict with the vows of chastity she has taken as a nun. Her passions are "stifled beneath this voluminous rustling snow!"-a reference to the white robe she wears as a nun. It symbolizes the confinement she feels in her role, while the snow represents barrenness. She comes to believe that barrenness is equivalent to waste and death. The mountains by the village are covered in snow, except in the spring when they are used to bear fruit. The African nun views herself as a mountain perpetually covered in snow. She longs for her own "spring" to come when the snow will melt and she can have children, the renewal of life. In the end, the African nun denies her desire to join the "dance of life," which represents the earthly pleasures of making love and having babies, and resigns herself to a life of self-sacrifice in what she feels is her duty to her God and the church.

Characters

African nun

A young nun who feels torn between her beliefs in Christ, the Catholic church, and her vows versus her own desire to make love and have babies. She feels that her barren state is equal to death and longs to do the dance of life. Despite her own wants and longings, she remains a faithful, barren wife of Christ and continues on her ministry.

Christ

Portrayed in this story as a celibate martyr and saint. Christ is described as the nun's husband who does not have the passion of his Father to come down and make love to her or impregnate her.



Objects/Places

Snow

The snow covers the mountains and only melts away once a year in the spring. The snow represents waste and barrenness to the African nun who feels she is "covered in snow" due to her white robe. The African nun draws this parallel because her childless marriage is like the snow-covered mountains: useless, a waste to herself and others. To her, barrenness represents death.

Mountains

The Ruwenzori mountains by the village are covered in snow except in the spring. When the snow melts, the people from the village plant their crops on the mountain. The African nun views herself as a mountain perpetually covered in snow, which in her eyes is a waste.

Spring

The spring is when the snow melts from the mountains. To the African nun, spring symbolizes the renewal of life, procreation. She longs for her own spring where the snow will melt and she would be allowed to have children, to experience the renewal of life.

White robe

The white robe is what the African nun wears to represent her status as a wife of Christ and of the church. It also symbolizes the confinement she feels in her celibate and barren role as a nun.

Dance of life

"Dance of life" refers to a part of the festivities occurring outside the African nun's window. festivities in which a woman dances, chooses a lover, and mates with him while everyone else watches. To the African nun, the dance of life represents the earthly pleasures of making love and having babies.



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

The narrator of this story is the African nun. Walker never provides the African nun with a name, but the reader knows her innermost thoughts, desires, and beliefs. The reader is privy to these private thoughts because the entirety of the story consists of excerpts from her diary. By the end of the story, the reader knows the nun's personal point of view regarding celibacy, barrenness, and procreation. In this way, the nun's life of self-sacrifice of her own desires for what she feels is her duty to her God and the church are deeply felt by the reader.

Setting

The Diary of an African Nun takes place in a township located at the foot of the Uganda mountains. The township has been "civilized" by American Catholic missionaries. The classroom where the nun lives and teaches becomes a hotel for travelers at night. It is within walking distance of the Ruwenzori mountains. These mountains are covered with snow that melts once a year in the spring; it is then that the people plant their crops on the mountain. The African nun stays in her room at night listening to the festivities that go on outside her window; a nightly festival in which a goat is cooked and eaten, wine is drunk, drumbeats sound, and dancing erupts, followed by lovers making love.

Language and Meaning

In *The Diary of an African Nun*, Walker's use of language for the African nun's diary entries is powerful. Walker uses a lot of symbols in this story to clearly convey the nun's desires, feelings and beliefs, with words like *snow*, *white robe*, *spring*, *mountain*, and "*the dance of life*." When describing the festivities that go on outside, Walker evokes a carnal, passionate, lively portrait of life. Walker contrasts this with the African nun always feeling confined in her white voluminous robe.

Structure

The Diary of an African Nun is divided into six sections, where each section is a diary entry. At first, the diary entries provide background information of where she lives, how she viewed priests and nuns as a child, and at what age she became a nun. It is not until the middle sections when the reader gets a very personal view of the African nun's inner struggle and longings for love and for children. The reader sees that her beliefs are in direct conflict with her desires. The ending sections illustrate the nun's self-sacrifice and resignation to not only abide by her vows but convert others to her way of life, as well.



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?