

Entertaining God Study Guide

Entertaining God by Alice Walker

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Entertaining God

Entertaining God Summary

This short story is divided into three distinct sections. The first section is about John, a black 15-year-old boy, who ultimately comes to his demise under bizarre circumstances. The second section concerns John's father. This section recounts the last moments of John's father's life and what his last thoughts and memories are about. The third section is about John's mother; it gives an account of her life and how she is coping years after her son's death.

Part 1 of the story opens with a statement about John loving the god provided to him. John is climbing a hill and pulling along a drugged gorilla that he has tied to a rope. The zookeepers had given the gorilla some medicine that made him drowsy and John was attempting to cajole the gorilla up the hill before the gorilla fell asleep. John had taken the gorilla out of his cage at the Bronx Zoo.

John is a very black boy with a flattened broad nose. John has a gentleness to his face. When John first saw the caged gorilla, he cried and suffered for days. John can't wait until the morning when the drugs will have worn off and he can attempt to better converse with the gorilla. John views this as his deliverance from believing in the god that his mother has chosen for him.

They come to a big rock buried in the ground and the gorilla refuses to walk any further and falls asleep. John stares at the gorilla in wonder for a while. They are still on the grounds of the Bronx Zoo. John does not intend to take the gorilla any further. John hopes they will not be discovered until he has received what he wants from the gorilla and he will be able to pay proper homage to the gorilla. John pets the gorilla while he sleeps, laughs in joy, and falls asleep beside it.

The next morning John begins his ritual. He first builds a fire. The gorilla awakens and is groggy but watches John. John retrieves the bread he has brought and unwraps it. The gorilla smells the bread and wants some. John unties the gorilla and has him sit by the fire. John proceeds to burn the bread piece by piece, dropping it into the fire. After each piece is burnt, John bows down to the ground in front of the gorilla, fervently speaking some words. The gorilla can smell the burning bread and is getting frustrated that John is not giving him any. John then takes the wine he has brought and opens the bottle. The gorilla smells the wine and finally comes out of his stupor, now fully alert and awake. The gorilla groans in protest when John pours half the wine in the fire. John continues his prayer as he bows down and drags himself to the gorilla's feet. John sees that the gorilla's feet have some similarities to his own: both are black and rough. John presents the burnt offerings and lays them at the feet of the gorilla, his "savage idol." The gorilla, agitated due to his hunger, bashes John's head in with his feet, killing him. The gorilla then reaches for the bread. John's last image is of the gorilla's feet and a blinding light.



The second section begins with the statement that John's father's life is ending. A tornado is leveling the houses on their block, giving John's father and his second wife enough time to grab their baby and their older son, run to the refrigerator, toss the food out, and put the children in, slamming the door. They then hold on to one another. Later, after the destruction the tornado leaves in its wake, the children are found by searchers, cold, injured, and running out of air, but alive, unlike their parents.

In his last moments of life, John's father only thinks fleetingly of God and of his second wife. John's father reflects more on his first wife, a librarian, and his son John. John's father has very black, rough skin. His first wife, in fact, had their wedding pictures touched up so his skin looked lighter and smooth. He married his wife because she was fun and carefree and had long, dyed red hair. Soon after they were married, she stopped dying her hair, wore boring gray suits, and was constantly reading books. She was no longer fun-loving or carefree, but serious, trying to be appear as respectable as possible. She stopped being the person he thought he knew. John's father quit his job at the post office and became a hairdresser. His son John had been too little to hold his interest and so he left.

John's father's second wife was a "sister in the Nation." They moved to the South so she could spread and teach the "Word" where it was needed. John's father changed his last name to an X but always had strong misgivings about this, stemming from knowing his son John would never be able to find him if he did not have a last name. Ten years went by before the father saw John, who was by then 14 years old, about to turn 15. The father was eager to talk with John, to do anything with John. John, on the other hand, was distracted and was more eager to go the Bronx Zoo before it closed. John's father was upset to find himself vying with a zoo for his son's attention. John looked at his father with impatience, pity, and superiority—a look John's father recognized, because John had been looked at like that when he was a baby. John inherited his father's looks; a backward-sloping forehead and too wide of a mouth. John's mother fussed over John, but hated him because he looked like his father. She blamed her husband for John looking as he did, having a physical appearance that is detested in the Western world.

His second wife loved him fiercely for his blackness and claimed him and their children like a badge of honor. John's father knew he was lost to John, but his second wife helped him to see that John was like so many that needed the truth that their religion could bring. John's father finally found peace and acceptance with himself, and it was at this time when the beauty of his own acceptance was realized that John's father's life was coming to an abrupt end.

The third section begins with a phrase concerning John's mother. John's mother has become a popular radical poet who is using the black revolution to find a rapport with the younger generation. In this way, John's mother feels she can right herself of past wrongs. She did not have the same beliefs or experiences as the other radical poets, though she did have a failed marriage to a black man and also blamed her former Southern college for encouraging her "whiteness" to grow and stunting her own revolutionary growth. However, it was not these life experiences that were the driving



passion for her popular poetic deliveries, but her son, who no one in her audience knew about.

She had been the assistant librarian in New York when John died. She had pieced together the details of John's death and spent two months in a sanitarium. A year later, she performed a complete overhaul of herself: cut her hair, replaced the high heels for sandals or boots, made African print dresses, wore hoop earrings, threw away her girdle, and made scarification marks down her cheeks.

Three or four years after her son's death, she began to contemplate writing poetry. No one talked to her after her poetic deliveries. She would watch the young students leave feeling beauty and pride about their blackness, and at this she felt sad. It was then she would visualize her son sitting in the back, eager and happy for her teachings. She had renamed him "Jomo" after his death and would call out to him when he came walking toward her. He never answered her, but would wait while she dried her eyes and escort her to the door.

Entertaining God Analysis

Entertaining God is the most improbable and bizarre short story of the entire collection. Whereas the plausibility of the other stories adds to the empathy and sadness the reader feels for the characters, that effective component is missing from this story.

There are various contributing factors that lead up to John's identifying with and making a gorilla his god or "savage idol." His own physical appearance is perceived and his parents are partly to blame. John is a 15-year-old boy who is described as having very black skin, a broad, flat nose, and a backward-sloping forehead. From the description of John, the reader can deduce that John and the gorilla have similar facial characteristics. This may be one of the reasons why John has made the gorilla his "savage idol," for he believes he is in his likeness. This is why John gazes at the gorilla's features in wonder and joy.

Another factor is how he is viewed and raised by his mother. John does not resemble his mother in any way. John gets his physical appearance from his father. His mother hates John's appearance and blames his absentee father for his features. She knows that John's appearance is detested and looked down upon in the Western world. At this time, John's mother is doing everything she can with her appearance to look more respectable and "white." She straightens her hair, wears drab gray suits, and tries to become more intellectual. In her wedding pictures, she has had John's father's skin touched up to appear lightened. John's mother also chose for John which God he should worship. John's mother does all of this because she has not accepted herself for who and what she is, a black woman.

John looks exactly like his father; however, John's father is not around for most of his life for him to identify with. John's father also struggles with his own self-acceptance, but instead of attempting to detach himself from his blackness, he embraces it with the help



of his religion and his second wife. By the time he has come to accept himself and reach out to John, it is too late and his son is already lost to him, having found his own self-acceptance by idolizing a gorilla.

After John's death and finding out the bizarre circumstances surrounding it, John's mother has a breakdown and undergoes a change in her view of the world. She does a 180, suddenly completely embracing her blackness and African roots through changes in her appearance and state of mind. She becomes a radical poet, affirming the beauty of being black and encouraging the young people to be filled with black pride. John's mother is fueled to do this because of her son. Through her radical poetry she is attempting to do for others what she did not do for her own son-help them find and accept their identity, their blackness. She is attempting to right the wrongs she made with her son, searching for John in the process.



Characters

John

A 15-year-old black boy. He resembles his father, with very black skin a broad, flat nose and a backward-sloping forehead. John is very lean and has a gentleness to his face. He has been raised by a mother who hates his appearance and tries to disassociate herself from their blackness. John has become fixated on a gorilla at the Bronx zoo. He has no interest in his absentee father and looks upon him slightly condescendingly with impatience and pity. John cries and suffers due to the gorilla's captivity and forces him to escape. John makes him his "savage idol" and pays homage to him, presenting him with burnt offerings. John is killed by the gorilla.

John's father

Is about to be killed by a tornado; in the last moments of his life, he thinks about his first wife and their son. John's father is very black with the same broad, flat nose and backward-sloping forehead. John's father used to work at the post office but quit to be a hairdresser. He likes being around all sorts of women. He believes his carefree first wife changed after they married and became focused on trying to be and appear more respectable. The marriage was failing and John was too small to interest him all that much, so he left. John remarried a "sister in the Nation" and joined as a brother as well. He was always aggrieved at having only an X as his last name; it caused him to feel that he did not have his own identity, did not exist, and that his son would never be able to find him. John's father seeks out his son after ten years of not seeing him and is annoyed to find that John is more interested in going to the zoo than speaking to him. He feels he has lost his son. Through his beliefs he has finally finds peace with himself and accepts himself. He realizes this before he dies.

John's mother

Once a young, carefree, fun-loving woman who would dye her hair red. She married and attempted to be more respectable, to appear less black and more white. She hates her son's appearance and blames her husband for what he had "done to" her son, for she knows that her son's looks would be despised where they lived. After her son's death, she has a breakdown and spends some time in a sanitarium. A year after her release she cuts off her hair and wears African-print dresses and hoop earrings and makes small scarification marks on her cheeks. She becomes a radical black poet. She sees her poetry as a way to right past transgressions with her son.



Objects/Places

Bronx zoo

The Bronx zoo is where John goes to see the gorilla. When John escapes with the gorilla, he stays on the grounds of the Bronx zoo.

Bread and Wine

John uses the bread as burnt offerings to the gorilla. John pours the wine in the fire as part of this ritual.

Gorilla

The gorilla at the Bronx zoo becomes John's savage idol and is what John identifies himself with.



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 *Entertaining God*, Walker writes in the third person with four alternating narrators with different points of view. The first perspective given is John's, a 15-year-old boy who has just escaped with a gorilla he has made his savage idol. The second perspective given is the gorilla's; it is a brief narrative but shows his thoughts are more on the food and wine he is smelling than anything John is doing. The third point of view given is found in the second section—John's father is in the last moments of his life and the reader is privy to his thoughts and memories. The final point of view given is in the last section, in which John's mother reminisces about her past, about life after John's death, and about how things are in the present. In this way, Walker provides insight into this family.

Setting

In *Entertaining God*, the setting of the story changes in each section. The first section has John on the grounds of the Bronx zoo, where John is attempting to coax a gorilla up a hill. In the second section, the scene is set in John's father's house in the South, moments before a tornado levels the house and kills John's father and his second wife. In the third section, the reader is with John's mother in a lecture hall after she has read one of her radical poems.

Language and Meaning

In *Entertaining God*, Walker intentionally only names one of the main characters: the child, John. Throughout the entire story the other two characters are only known in relation to John: John's father and John's mother. Walker may have done this to emphasize her theme of identity and self-acceptance.

Structure

In *Entertaining God*, Walker divides the story into three distinct sections. The first section concerns John, and details the last day of his life. The second section is about John's father and his last moments of life. Whereas in the first section, Walker details the actions of John, in the second section Walker details the last thoughts and memories of John's father. The third section is all about John's mother and her life, past and present. It is interesting to note that prior to each section, Walker provides a phrase pertaining to that person that not only gives the reader a preview of what is happening but also a summation of the character in that moment.



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?