

The Flowers Study Guide

The Flowers by Alice Walker

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The Flowers

The Flowers Summary

This story is about Myop, a ten-year-old black girl. It's a beautiful day and Myop is happy and full of youthful energy and innocence. Myop is skipping along, singing a song, and tapping out a beat with the stick in her hand. She is skipping by her family's henhouse, pigpen, and smokehouse. She turns away from her family's sharecropper cabin and walks along the fence, then comes to the stream where her family retrieves their drinking water. She watches the water and looks at the wild flowers. Myop then begins to explore the woods, which she has done on numerous occasions. In late autumn, Myop and her mother would often go to the woods and gather nuts together.

On this day Myop goes a new way into the woods. She discovers a batch of strange and beautiful blue flowers and brown buds from a sweetsuds bush. By noon, Myop's arms are full of various flowers she has found and picked. She finds herself in a gloomy silent cove about a mile away from her home. The unfamiliarity of her surroundings takes the pleasure out of the place, so Myop starts to head home with her findings.

It is on her return that Myop steps into a dead man's eyes. Her heel becomes stuck in the man's broken ridge between his brow and nose. Promptly and fearlessly, Myop reaches down with her hand to free herself. That is when Myop sees the man's naked grin, and she makes a sound of surprise. She sees that the man had once been tall, for his body is long despite his head laying beside him. As she pushes back the debris, she finds that he had big teeth, all of which have been broken or cracked. His fingers are long and he was a big-boned man. His clothes have mostly rotted away and the buckles of his overalls are now green. Myop looks around the area with interest and spots a beautiful pink rose. She picks it to add to her collection and notices that around the root of the rose is a noose, which is now rotted through. Up above, Myop sees an oak branch with a strand of frayed, rotting rope still turning restlessly in the breeze. She lays down her flowers. Her summer is over.

The Flowers Analysis

In *The Flowers*, Alice Walker depicts the end of one girl's childhood and innocence. This story differs from the other stories in this collection, as it is the shortest story, only two pages long and written in a different font than the other stories. It is not clear why Alice Walker does this, but presenting it in this way makes it seem to be a brief interlude between the other stories.

Myop is described as a happy child without a worry in her mind. She sees the beauty in her surroundings and to her each day is a happy surprise. The reader follows the innocent child on her walk and the story details how she starts picking beautiful flowers.



There is one point of foreshadowing in this story: when she stops, arms full of flowers, and looks at her surroundings before heading back home. The place is gloomy, damp, and silent. Prior to this, everything was bright and beautiful. The reader is put on alert with this foreshadowing, knowing something more sinister is about to take place. It is on her way home that she steps into a dead man's face. Due to either her innocence or the common occurrence of being around death in her life, Myop is unafraid. Curious, she studies the dead man, surveys her surroundings, and sees a beautiful pink rose. As she picks the flower she finds remnants of a noose, and then up above, she spots a strand of rope. It is then that Myop lays down her flowers and the story states that the summer was over. This is the moment that Myop's childhood ends and her innocence is lost. The flowers represent the beauty of life and Myop represents childhood innocence. Death is represented, obviously, in the dead man, but it is not the discovery of this dead man that ends Myop's childhood. The discovery of the noose and rope is what ends her innocence. In this story then, the noose and rope represents the existence of evil.



Characters

Myop

An innocent, ten-year-old black girl at the start of the story, enjoying a walk and gathering flowers on a nice day. She has no cares in the world and is happy. She discovers a dead man and is unafraid. She proceeds to collect a flower and discovers a noose, and in the tree, some remains of the rope. She lays down her flowers: innocence is lost.

Dead Man

A dead black man who has been hanged. He is decapitated by the lynching and by hanging for so long. His body is in decay but it is evident that he was a tall, big-boned man. The sight of him, having been killed in a lynching, alerts Myop to the presence of evil in the world.



Objects/Places

Flowers

Wild flowers of different colors are being picked by Myop. The flowers represent innocence, life, and the beauty of life.

Dead man

The dead man represents death, and shows that even though he was once a big, strong man, this had no bearing on preventing his own death.

Noose/rope

The noose/rope used to kill the dead man symbolizes the existence of evil.

Mexico

At first, Mexico is the place the professor plans to go after he leaves Mississippi. He believes the beauty of Mexico will take some time for him to recognize. However, the professor starts fantasizing that he takes Harriet with him and dreams about lying with her and giving her his love. By the end of the story, Mexico is no longer the place he can escape to, due to his dreams about taking Harriet, he now must look further south.

Social Sensitivity

Alice Walker's story, "The Flowers," does not spell out its social concerns: instead, they must be read through hints. This is not to say, however, that this story is straightforward. Rather, the implications must be teased out beyond the sketch-like portrayal of events in the work. Simply put, the story deals with one morning in the life of a young girl called Myop, who strays beyond her usual haunts while looking for flowers. While walking back, she literally steps on the remains of a man whom, she discovers, has been lynched. At this point, the story ends.

It is the terse brevity of Walker's narrative in this work that warns the reader to give the text the kind of close reading normally reserved for poetry. Furthermore, one of the epigraphs to *In Love and Trouble* (the collection of stories of which "The Flowers" is a part), refers to the human predisposition to seek solutions to the easiest of presenting problems while the ones that are more difficult to resolve. The epigraph asserts that we must hold to, and confront, the greater difficulties rather than settling for the path of least resistance. This need is reflected in the way that the protagonist, Myop, and reader are forced to confront lynching, one of the most haunting specters of violent racism.

Walker highlights the omnipresence of racism by dramatizing its violent impact on a ten-year-old girl who lives on a sharecropping farm. (The issue of sharecropping is dealt with in the section on Themes.) By presenting the revelation as a discovery of a long-buried (literally) past atrocity, Walker symbolizes the ways in which the history of lynching is a hidden history of accounts left untold, victims' bodies hidden in remote areas, suspected killings never confirmed, and murderers left untried. In many of the better known cases, incidents of lynching often resulted in carnivallike celebrations amongst white communities, with the lynching itself forming a visible, even theatrical spectacle. What Walker chooses to unearth in this work is the hidden practice of racism, occluded in many cases by the approval or even complicity of law enforcement officers. The existence of this difficult problem must be acknowledged before it can be challenged.

Walker asserts that childhood innocence cannot survive in the face of this history of murder. She asserts that the practice of lynching is a part of a continuing history of racist attacks. This continuing history is underlined in the collection as a whole, for the stories take place in a wide variety of historical settings. While the crime in "The Flowers" happens many years before Myop finds the body, other stories in the collection detail more contemporary violent racist attacks. Furthermore, Walker's readership at the time of the story's publication in 1973 would recognize echoes of the lynchings which formed part of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.



Techniques

"The Flowers" is not even two pages long, and so Walker's narrative is correspondingly dense with significance. To begin with narration, there is an abrupt shift in style at the point when Myop discovers the body. Before this event, the narrative reflects the excited tone of childhood pleasure, describing Myop's gaze flitting from place to place, revelling in all that she sees.

When she stands on the skull, the narrative shifts to a very matter-of-fact description of Myop's curiosity and her unearthing of the skeleton. Through the shockingly incongruous description of the noose as blending "benignly" into the soil, Walker highlights the horror of Myop's discovery that the man has been lynched, which ends both a carefree day and an innocently curious childhood. Perhaps in her choice of a old plowline for a noose, Walker also implies that African Americans have been reduced to beasts of burden and field laborers, a practice which continued after the Civil War in the practice of sharecropping.

Walker's title is symbolic. Walker uses both flowers and summer as symbols for innocence and the state of innocence in childhood. Though Myop enjoys the summer and gathers flowers for most of the story, in the final two lines, Walker states that Myop lays down the flowers and that summer was over. Since the flowers are dropped at the feet of the unburied man's body, they could also symbolize an act of mourning that comes too late. Finally, just as the man has not been accorded a proper burial, so the racist violence that killed him has not been laid to rest; its currents stir restlessly like the ragged ends of the lynch rope.



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.

One theme concerns how innocence is sustained by ignorance or lost by knowledge. Crucially, Walker begins the story with the words: "It seemed ." These words are revealed as the key to reading the first half of the story itself. The summer days seem beautiful to Myop, as she skips through life with the carefree innocence of a ten-year-old. Nonetheless, the story proves that life only seems safe and beautiful because Myop is sheltered and innocent. In short, the story charts Myop's sudden and total loss of innocence.

Throughout the first half of the story, Walker artfully draws a picture of Myop's enjoyment of a summer morning: the air, the crops, the livestock all entrance her. As Walker writes: "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." Indeed, nothing does exist for Myop except her pleasure, but Walker hints that Myop's innocent enjoyment is effectively gilding her perception of her family's situation. This is suggested in her very name, Myop, which brings to mind myopia, the condition of short-sightedness. Before the dramatic revelation of racist violence, Myop fails to see that racist forces already have an impact on her life.

Walker demonstrates the pervasive background presence of racism by situating Myop's family in a sharecropper's cabin.

Despite the lack of any further mention of this fact, a reader familiar with the history of the United States cannot help but think that the sharecropping system forced post-Civil War freed African-American families into an economic virtual slavery almost as profound as formal slavery. Though harvests might seem to be filled with golden surprises for Myop, historically they occasioned long hours of backbreaking toil for sharecropping families, anxiously struggling to maximize the yield of their land. Furthermore, they were times of bitterness, as almost the whole harvest went to the white owners of their land, while the sharecroppers slid further into debt and were often left to live off produce unfit for sale. This hint of the poverty of Myop's family is subtly strengthened by Walker's passing reference to the rusted boards of their sharecropper cabin.

As Walker describes Myop's walk into the woods behind the cabin, the reader is transported to the innocent wonder of childhood through sensual detail and the varieties of flowers that Myop gathers. Moreover, we are told that Myop has explored the woods many times before with her mother. Again, though, Walker shows how appearances can be deceptive and how the familiar haunts of childhood can turn threatening. Myop discovers that she has wandered too far, and the familiar woods become threatening.



Walker underlines the change as the golden sunlight, dry heat, and bright colors of the familiar woods become "gloomy. . . the air [becomes] damp, the silence close and deep." The day no longer seems pleasurable and safe to Myop.

To some extent, this change in tone prepares the reader for the disturbing discovery that follows. Nonetheless, when Myop's foot comes down between the eyes of the grinning skull, this sudden appearance of death, amidst the variety of life which so entrances Myop, is shocking. It is not first the fact of the man's death, however, that spells the end of Myop's innocence, for Walker writes that Myop, having unearthed the man's remains, "gazed around the scene with interest." More tellingly, Myop is still engaged in her innocent project of gathering flowers: she picks a pink rose, even though it grows close to the skull. At this point she sees the loop of plowline, and the full implications of the scene Myop has uncovered become clear to the character and the reader. The loop is still tied to the remnants of an oak branch. Thus, Walker dramatizes that the man has been lynched.

The revealed fact of lynching, exposed that summer after being hidden for many years, causes Myop's loss of innocence. The final line, "And the summer was over", stands alone as the single sentence of the last paragraph, forcing readers to think about the way in which Myop's innocence has been destroyed: she can no longer be innocent, can no longer be a child, in the face of this evidence of the U.S. history of racial violence. Finally, Walker would expect her readers to know of contemporary lynching and racial violence. This continued threat is suggested in the restless spinning of the loop around the bough. As the loop is described as clinging to the bough, so the threat of lethal violence clings threateningly to American racial relationships; the forces of resentment and insecurity that drive lynching eddy restlessly and unpredictably.



Style

Point of View

The Flowers is a very short story written in the third person. Due to the youth of the Myop, the reader is able to see the world through the innocent eyes of the child. Myop sees beauty all around her and it is only at the end where Myop becomes aware of death and the existence of evil.

Setting

The setting for this story is outside a sharecropper's cabin on a beautiful day. Myop takes a walk past the stream and into the woods. This story does not reveal in which year this is taking place-the reader may assume it occurs during the time of sharecroppers and lynchings.

Language and Meaning

Due to the perspective being that of a ten-year-old girl, the language used in this story is basic and simple, fitting the vocabulary and thoughts of a child.

Structure

The Flowers is Walker's shortest story in this collection-a mere two pages long. Due to this it is left as a whole, with no breaks, sections, or poetry to divide 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)

Key Questions

"The Flowers" is a study in control and brevity. Through an account of one child's loss of innocence, Walker manages to evoke the ways in which the history of racist violence in America is temporarily hidden and how that history continues to blight the American landscape. Just as Myop must uncover the man's body and learn the secrets of his murder, so Walker's epigraph suggests that people must strive to uncover this hidden past as a whole. Furthermore they must acknowledge their responsibility to acknowledge these past crimes. In seeing the past accurately people make strides to put to rest its legacy.

1. What do you think the flowers symbolize in this story?
2. Explain the value in the story's shortness and also explore what is thus left unsaid? Offer some explanations for why Walker chooses not to write about other parts that might have been included in a longer version.
3. Identify the benefits of childhood innocence and its dangers. What is the risk of being idealistic in a racist society?
4. What does the anonymous omniscient narrator add to the story?
5. Why do you think that Walker shocks her readers with Myop's discovery?

How do you think that this relates to the notion of racist violence as a hidden history?



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?

Literary Precedents

In a number of interviews, Walker has made plain her indebtedness to the work of Zora Neale Hurston (*In Love and Trouble* is dedicated to the memory of Hurston). Walker sees her work continuing in the vein of Hurston's by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced and whose sufferings have gone untold. In doing so, Walker says that she writes the stories that she wanted to read as a child but could never find. Like Walker, Hurston's work uncovers hidden stories, such as African American folk tales in *Of Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), and the stories and voices of African-American women silenced by both racist and sexist oppression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

A contemporary text with particular relevance to "The Flowers" is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1972). Like Walker, Morrison's text dramatizes the effects of endemic racism on the innocence, and eventually the sanity, of a young African-American girl.

The particular type of racism in Morrison's text is that implicit in the American ideal of feminine beauty. This ideal is represented in the work by the blonde hair and blue eyes of Shirley Temple: there is no ideal or even possibility of African American beauty.

The young protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, is driven mad by her desire to attain this impossible white ideal, a madness which destroys her childhood and eventually takes her life.

Related Titles

While "The Flowers" can be studied in isolation, the reader can discern certain patterns by reading the story in the context of Walker's collection *In Love and Trouble*. The italicization of the whole text of "The Flowers" is a perfect example. In "Roselily," the first story of the collection, the narrative is divided by italicized clauses from a traditional Christian marriage ceremony. These clauses provide an ironic counterpoint to the story of the protagonist, who is virtually forced into a loveless marriage in order to better the lot of her child. In light of this, we can read "The Flowers," the only story in the collection to be produced completely in italics, as a kind of meta-commentary. For this tiny story describes in microcosm the blighting effect that racism, in its many forms, can have on the early years of African-American children, while it also underlines the hidden continuation of racist violence and the fact that racist history cannot be hidden permanently.

In "The Child Who Favored Daughter," Walker approaches the blighting effect of racism on childhood in another way. In the story, the father's violent misogyny can be traced to, though not in any way excused by, the sexual mistreatment of his beloved sister (named Daughter) at the hands of the white man he labored for. In this story, flowers, described as beautiful, yet fragile, are used to symbolize the love and sensuality of the man's daughter, who is the very image of Daughter. The daughter's sensuality, which finds expression in her desire for a white man, is something that her father's beatings cannot tame. After he maims his daughter in a rage, the father sees the destruction of her fragile life in the delicate black-eyed Susans. This suggests that, in "The Flowers," just as "the summer" suggests Myop's innocence, so the title and Myop's gathering of flowers imply the possibility of healthy and beautiful childhood growth threatened by endemic racism.

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