

Her Sweet Jerome Study Guide

Her Sweet Jerome by Alice Walker

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Her Sweet Jerome

Her Sweet Jerome Summary

The story begins with the black female narrator going frantically through a closet full of clothes and throwing the clothes on the bed after she has checked all of the pockets. The clothes that she is searching through were purchased by her for her man. She finds nothing in the pockets and reflects on how he doesn't like most of the clothes she has bought for him but wears them if she agrees to stay home and not touch him while he is getting dressed.

The narrator is described as a big, awkward black woman with fat hands and a fat neck and body. Her problems begin when she first falls in love with a schoolteacher, Mr. Jerome Franklin Washington III, who is ten years younger than she. The narrator vows that she would become Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III; later, she does. She owns a beauty shop in back of her father's funeral home. She makes good money with her business and her family has the reputation of being "colored folks with money." Her father tells her she would never get any of his money while he was alive, and the narrator takes pride in the fact that she doesn't need his money, for she is successful in her own right. Her father, however, is willing to part with his money to help Jerome, the respected schoolteacher, become part of the family. But the narrator won't let her father help, because she wants to be the only one who provides for her man.

The female narrator has a low opinion of women schoolteachers. One reason why she has such a low opinion is because these are the only women whom Jerome would talk to before and after her marriage to him. The narrator, or Mrs. Washington III, also has airs about being able to make her own way in life and be successful without an "eddicashion."

Mrs. Washington purchases expensive gifts for Jerome, such as fine clothes and a red car. When she could tell that Jerome didn't like something, she would save up or go into debt to buy him something bigger and even more expensive.

The narrator's marriage to Jerome is filled with physical and emotional abuse. Jerome regularly beats on his wife and acts as if he cannot stand the sight of her. Jerome also doesn't allow her to touch him. Jerome curses or cringes when his wife attempts to kiss him. He flinches at the sound of her voice as if the sound of it is irritating. When his wife attempts to look sexy or dresses up for church, he laughs at how ridiculous she looks. The narrator doesn't know to laugh or cry when Jerome continually runs her down, so instead she pretends to herself that her sweet Jerome looks at her with approving eyes.

Mrs. Washington does not only accept Jerome's abuse-she attempts to deny it to the outside world. She wears sunglasses to hide her bruises and tells her customers at the beauty shop how she doesn't understand how women put up with men who beat them. She proudly claims that Jerome never beats her. The customers are not fooled by the



narrator's claims; they feel contempt for her and laugh at her because she acts superior. The narrator tells everyone that Jerome is a gentleman. Despite people's disbelief or outright laughing, she continues with her dignified airs to keep up appearances, for the narrator still has a lot of pride and likes to feel superior to others.

Customers begin insinuating that Jerome is keeping something from her, perhaps cheating on her. The narrator readily believes this is true since Jerome no longer makes love to her. She becomes obsessed with finding the woman who is sleeping with "her sweet Jerome" and starts collecting weapons of all kinds, searching the town. She says nothing to her husband about her frantic searching. Jerome meanwhile stays home and reads his collection of paperback books; for this, his wife is glad, because it keeps him home. Jerome agrees to stay home if she will be quiet and not interrupt his reading.

The narrator continues to become more obsessed with finding the mistress and spends most of her time searching throughout the city. She starts threatening total strangers with her knife pressed against their necks, asking if they've been with her man. At work, she accuses customers of being with her Jerome and burns them with the curling iron while doing their hair. Mrs. Washington stops taking care of her own appearance: she stops bathing, stops brushing her hair, and eventually stops working. She doesn't sleep; she stinks of her own sweat; she also stops cleaning and maintaining her own house. She starts ripping out her hair and grinding her teeth while she wanders the city. Mrs. Washington is aware that she is "cracking up" but doesn't care-she is too obsessed with finding Jerome's lover.

Then the narrator's father dies and leaves his money to Jerome. Jerome does not share the money with his wife. She never sees him buy anything with the money, yet one day it is gone. His wife is so preoccupied with trying to find his lover that she doesn't really care what he spent the money on as long as it wasn't the other woman.

As the narrator's breakdown progressively gets worse, her husband Jerome is excelling: he becomes even more respected among academic peers; he becomes known as an "intellectual"; he starts attending a group with people who call themselves by their African names; he also starts attending workshops. The narrator has no idea what goes on at these meetings or workshops. She finally busts in on one of Jerome's meetings, but still doesn't understand what is being discussed although she tries. The group is talking of violence and overthrowing. Everyone ignores her, including Jerome who starts reciting a poem with disgusting words that she has never heard before. One woman laughingly acknowledges her by asking if she's come to join the revolution. Bewildered and puzzled, Mrs. Washington leaves. She goes home and starts rummaging through Jerome's closet and the pockets of his clothes. She looks under the bed-and that is when she finds all the books Jerome has been reading. She is hit with the realization that there is no other woman, and that Jerome has not been having an affair; rather, it is much more serious than an affair. Jerome has been reading books on black power and revolution, books with words that she knows she'll never comprehend or understand.

The narrator is angry that she missed the obvious and that Jerome has been secretly laughing at her the whole time she went searching the city for another woman. She



feels like a fool encouraging his "light" reading. Mrs. Washington stacks the books and stabs them with her knife. When this does not cause enough damage, she sets the bed on fire and watches the books and bed burn. The narrator is still enraged, and while the fire grows, she screams that the books are trash, yelling "I kill you! I kill you!" Then the narrator catches on fire herself and continues screaming.

Her Sweet Jerome Analysis

In *Her Sweet Jerome*, the third story in Alice Walker's collection, Walker continues to portray black men in a negative light. In the previous stories, the men were denying/stifling their wives' freedom or expressions of that freedom by not allowing them to be true to themselves or see their own dreams and desires through to fruition. In this story, Jerome, the husband, aids in his own wife's breakdown by physically and emotionally abusing her.

The narrator, Jerome's wife, has money, which is a source of power for her, but she has no education. Jerome has knowledge, which is his type of power, but no money. From the narrator's description of her pursuit of her husband, the reader can easily infer that Jerome did not marry his wife out of love. And even though Jerome appears dismissive and to dislike everything his wife buys him, her money is most likely the reason why he married her.

The narrator has a very high opinion of herself and prides herself of being a success without the need for further education. She acts superior to others, and in her boasting, she unwittingly displays the extent of her ignorance in how she speaks. When Jerome's hateful treatment of her starts chipping away at her self-esteem, she deludes herself into believing that he really is attracted to her and loves her.

The narrator becomes obsessed with finding and killing Jerome's (nonexistent) mistress. To Jerome's wife, the fictitious lover can be held responsible and be blamed for everything that is wrong in the marriage; her husband's lack of interest in her, the reason he no longer makes love to her, and his abusing her. In this way she and her sweet Jerome can remain blameless. It is important to note that the narrator views Jerome as "hers" as if he is one of her bought possessions.

The narrator finally stumbles onto Jerome's books. The books symbolize knowledge and power. When his wife realizes there is no other woman and that Jerome's passion is for knowledge, she knows she is defeated. She realizes that she can't bully, kill, or compete with knowledge, for she has no education and can't begin to comprehend what the books are even about. Though wealthy, she can't buy intelligence. The only power she has is tied to what her money can buy...and it no longer can buy Jerome. She realizes she is inferior. In her impotent outrage she burns the books, and the fire ends up consuming her as well.



Characters

Narrator (Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III)

Described as an awkward, big-boned black woman, an ugly woman. She runs her own beauty shop behind her father's funeral parlor. She makes good money and feels superior because of this. She is prideful and feels superior despite having no education. She falls in love with Jerome the moment she sees him and vows she will be his wife; indeed, she succeeds in marrying Jerome. She continues buying him things throughout their relationship. Even though Jerome is physically and emotionally abusive to her, she considers him "her sweet Jerome." She lies to herself that he really does like what he sees, and she keeps up her appearances by denying that he beats her-she tells people what a gentlemen he is to her. She does not like women schoolteachers, partly out of jealousy that those are the only women Jerome talks to and partly out of her own feelings of superiority. She believes Jerome is cheating on her and becomes obsessed with finding the woman. She completely lets herself go and knows she is "cracking up" but does not care. In the end, when she discovers Jerome is not having an affair and that it is books and knowledge that is her adversary, she knows she is defeated and is enraged, burning the books and killing herself in the process.

Jerome

A black man who is a schoolteacher. Jerome is married to the narrator and is ten years younger than she is. Jerome physically and emotionally abuses his wife, whom he does not like. He does not want her to touch him or to even speak. He no longer makes love to his wife. Jerome's interest is in the black movement going on at the time. His reputation as a scholar and intellectual grows as his own wife's reputation declines. Jerome derives pleasure from his wife's obsession with finding his fictitious lover.

Narrator's father

A black man with money that stems from owning a funeral home. He is unwilling for his daughter to receive any of his money while he is alive or even after his death. Leaves his money to Jerome, because Jerome is a man with an education who has the intelligence to know what to do with it.



Objects/Places

Beauty shop

Jerome's wife owns and runs a successful beauty shop. It is her source of pride, superiority, and source of money.

Jerome's books

Jerome's books on black power and the black revolution. At first, Jerome's wife views them as "light reading." At the end she realizes they are Jerome's true interest and passion. The books symbolize knowledge and power. Jerome's wife has no education and can't begin to comprehend what the books are even about. She realizes she is inferior. In her impotent outrage, she burns the books and the fire ends up consuming her as well.



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

Her Sweet Jerome is narrated in the third person from Jerome's wife's point of view. In this way the reader is shown the very strong opinions held by Jerome's wife concerning how she views herself and education, and how (despite Jerome's physical and emotional abuse) she views "her sweet" Jerome. Throughout most of the story she sees money as power and education as something inferior. It is only at the end of the story that she realizes that even though she has money, she is inferior because she is ignorant. The reader can view Jerome's wife as an unreliable narrator, obsessed as the wife is on finding a fictitious lover and moving toward a breakdown.

Setting

The story is set in a town somewhere in the South where Jerome teaches school and his wife owns and runs her own beauty shop at the back of her father's funeral parlor. It takes place in a number of specific settings: in their home, in their bedroom, in her beauty shop where she works, at one of Jerome's meetings, and throughout the town as she searches for Jerome's suspected lover.

Language and Meaning

The language used by Jerome's wife and her customers at the beauty shop is uneducated "black" slang. Most of the language used by Jerome's wife would not be called proper English and is used to highlight the stark contrast between the educated Jerome and his ignorant wife. For example, Jerome's wife's word for education is "eddicashion." It also becomes evident that Jerome's wife has a limited vocabulary and does not comprehend words like "revolution."

Structure

Walker separates this short story into three sections. The three sections serve to break up the narration of the story and move the plot along while still retaining the reader's interest. The first chapter is the longest, explaining what is going on in the present moment: the wife looking through her husband's clothes and then giving history of the first time she seen him, their subsequent marriage, and his mistreatment of her. It also details her views on educated women, her pride at being a success and making good money, and the superiority she has toward others. The wife is also shown keeping up public appearances and denying the rumors of Jerome's abusing her. She raves about what a gentlemen Jerome is and how he never beats her. The second chapter is about Mrs. Washington's hearing a rumor that Jerome is cheating on her. This chapter highlights the narrator's breakdown and obsession with finding the other woman; it also



details Jerome's upward climb in certain educated circles. Chapter 3 is the smallest of the sections, the one that brings the reader back to the present and finds Mrs. Washington rifling through her husband's clothes. She realizes that Jerome has no lover and that his passion, instead, is for books. She sets fire to the books and then the fire consumes her. The story ends abruptly.



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?