

In Love & Trouble; Stories of Black Women Study Guide

In Love & Trouble; Stories of Black Women by Alice Walker

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Roselily

Roselily Summary

Roselily is standing on a porch, being married to a man she does not love by a Christian preacher. Roselily is the mother of four children. Roselily gave one of her children to the child's father to be raised by him and his wife because he was educated, able to give the child a good life. Roselily often thinks of this child and wonders if he is happy.

Roselily now thinks of her other three children, for whom she is getting married today. Her fiancé has promised to provide well for her and her children, to allow her to quit her job. Roselily hates her job in a clothing factory and was so excited by the thought of quitting it that she agreed to marry this man immediately. Now Roselily wonders if she is doing the right thing, if marrying this man is worth the respectability that he offers.

Roselily also worries about this man's religion which will force her to keep her head covered in public. Roselily knows her Christian friends and neighbors will not understand this religion, so she is glad to be moving to Chicago after the wedding.

Roselily Analysis

Roselily is a mother of four children. It is clear in this story that Roselily loves her children very much and would do anything to give them a better life. This is illustrated by the fact that Roselily gave one of her children to his father, an educated man who could give her child a life she could not provide. Now Roselily is marrying a man she clearly does not love. Roselily has agreed to marry this man because she is tired of working for a living, suggesting that Roselily is a woman who wants more than she knows she is capable of providing for herself and her children. Therefore, even though Roselily does not love this man she is marrying, love is a theme of the story because she is marrying this man out of love for her children. Finally, Roselily mentions that her husband is from a religion she does not fully understand, one that will force her to keep her head covered in public. This suggests to the reader that her husband is a Muslim and that she is about to enter a world that she will find difficult and restrictive.



'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?'

'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?' Summary

The narrator lives in a respectable brick house with her husband, Ruel. Ruel hopes that this new home will be a new beginning for himself and his wife, allowing them to forget the difficult past. The narrator recalls meeting Mordecai and how he talked to her about the stories he writes. The narrator, an aspiring writer, shows Mordecai twenty years worth of writing she has hidden throughout her home because her husband does not approve of her writing. When Mordecai expresses his approval of her writing, the narrator becomes his lover. Soon after, Mordecai asks to take some of her writings, suggesting he might be able to get them published. Mordecai disappears soon after.

The narrator, under pressure from her husband, goes to a doctor to find out why she has not become pregnant. While in the waiting room, the narrator opens a magazine and finds herself looking at a story based on one of her story ideas that she once showed Mordecai. The character and the story have been changed slightly, but the narrator knows it is her story. Mordecai is listed as the author. The narrator is crushed by this betrayal. Later, after making love to her husband, the narrator attempts to murder her husband. The narrator is placed in a mental hospital and when she is released, she finds her husband has bought his dream home. Now the husband redoubles his efforts to make the narrator pregnant. However, the narrator is using the birth control pill.

'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?' Analysis

This story illustrates the theme of betrayal. The narrator, an aspiring author, becomes a reluctant lover to a man visiting the area to find story ideas for his writing career. The narrator shows him her writings, believing that he wants to help her get published. Instead, the man steals her stories and publishes them under his own name. The narrator is crushed by this man's betrayal, but he has gone and she cannot express her pain to him or to anyone else. The narrator's husband never approved of her writing and it is because of his lack of support that she showed her lover the writing. This causes the narrator to turn her pain and hurt on her husband, attempting to kill him. The husband forgives her and decides to make a family in the hopes that it will give her something to do to occupy her time. However, the narrator believes she is getting the final revenge by using birth control pills. The irony of this story is that the narrator is hurting no one but herself by lying to her husband.



Her Sweet Jerome

Her Sweet Jerome Summary

A woman is searching through her husband's closet, looking for some clue to the identity of his lover. The woman, Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III, married a schoolteacher whom she believed to be quietly intelligent and very cute. It never bothered Mrs. Washington that her husband showed a lack of affection for her and was in fact often annoyed by her shows of affection. Mrs. Washington made herself see things that were not there, like loving approval in her husband's eyes.

Mrs. Washington owns a beauty salon in a shop behind her father's funeral parlor. Mrs. Washington is proud that she can provide for her husband without the help of her father's money. However, it is not long after her marriage that Mrs. Washington begins hearing rumors of her husband's infidelity. Mrs. Washington never asks her husband about this, but instead begins going all over town looking for the woman who might be his lover. Mrs. Washington gathers a collection of weapons and is often seen holding a knife to a woman's throat, demanding if she is the woman sleeping with her husband. Mrs. Washington becomes so obsessed with finding her husband's lover that she stops going to work and focuses solely on her goal.

Mrs. Washington one day follows her husband to one of the many meetings that often takes him away from home in the evenings. Mrs. Washington walks in to find women in a corner talking among themselves and her husband with a group of men in another corner, talking. Mrs. Washington's husband stands when he sees her and begins reciting a nasty poem. Now Mrs. Washington is searching her bedroom for clues to her husband's lover. Under the bed, Mrs. Washington finds a stack of books among those she encouraged her husband to read because they kept him home at night. For the first time Mrs. Washington reads the titles and suddenly she understands that her husband's lover is not a person. Jerome Washington is cheating on his wife with the idea of black revolution, of standing up to the white man for the oppression of his race. Mrs. Washington becomes distraught and lights a fire of the books, moving in such a way as to place the fire between her and escape.

Her Sweet Jerome Analysis

Mrs. Washington is not an attractive woman, therefore she feels lucky to have a husband such as schoolteacher Jerome Washington. It does not bother Mrs. Washington that her husband does not have affection for her and dislikes for her to touch him. Mrs. Washington only wants him to be faithful. When rumors fly that her husband is unfaithful, Mrs. Washington becomes obsessed with the idea of his lover. Mrs. Washington will stop at nothing to stop this betrayal, a theme of the novel.



In an ironic twist, Mrs. Washington discovers that her husband's lover is not a person, but an idea. The setting of the novel is important in the fact that it takes place at the height of the racial tensions that existed in the United States in the sixties. Jerome Washington has not taken a lover, but has joined a radical movement that proposes using violence to force white people to give the blacks the rights they deserve. Mrs. Washington is distraught by this discovery because a lover she could have killed or competed against, but this revolution she cannot control. Mrs. Washington would rather kill herself than face losing her husband to an ideal.



The Child Who Favored Daughter

The Child Who Favored Daughter Summary

The girl gets off the school bus and can see her father waiting for her on the front porch. The father has a gun and a piece of paper in his hand. The girl knows he has found the letter. The girl wonders if it was her lover's mother who gave it to him or if her lover's new wife did it.

The father watches his daughter walk toward him, never taking his eyes from her. The father thinks of his sister, Daughter, whom this child resembles. Daughter was a charming young woman, beautiful and full of life. The father was deeply in love with Daughter until she became the lover of the white farmer. When she returned home from this affair, Daughter was ill, her hair gone and her teeth loose in her head. The family tortured her for her acts, tying her to a bed and waiting for her to die. When she did not die, the family would throw food at Daughter only when they remembered. One day Daughter was almost like her old self and talked her brother, the father, into untying her. The father did and she was later found impaled on a stake of the steel fence.

The father takes his own child to the shed and beats her for hours before stopping to feed the dogs and rest. The father wakes the next morning and finds his child still in the shed, bruised but alive. The father touches her, finds himself sexually attracted to her, and begins to fondle her breasts. The father then takes out his pocket knife and cuts off her breasts, leaving her to die in the shed. The father returns to the porch and rocks his shotgun like a baby against his knees.

The Child Who Favored Daughter Analysis

In this story, the father feels betrayed by his older sister who was so beautiful and charming that she made him love her deeply. However, this sister broke her family's heart by having an affair with the farmer for whom they all worked. This betrayal, and the sister's later death, has remained with the father for many years. The father feels as though her crime was made even more wicked by the fact that her affair was with a white man. The father grows into an adult and hopes that his child would be better, virtuous, and that he can save her by taking her to church and raising her properly. When it comes to the father's attention that his daughter has been having an affair with a white man, he forgets about virtue and morality, instead killing her for her actions. Included in this story is the idea that the father was sexually attracted not only to his sister, but to his daughter as well, suggesting that his anger is a projection of his disgust at his own emotions.



Everyday Use

Everyday Use Summary

The narrator, an older woman who has worked hard all her life, is sitting in the yard waiting for her daughter, Dee, to return home after a long absence. As she waits, the mother thinks of dreams she has had of seeing her daughter again on a television show and being impressed with her daughter's quick wit and charm. The mother waits with her other daughter, Maggie, who has severe scars from a house fire that took place years ago. The fire destroyed their house, a house Dee had always disliked and been ashamed of. They do not live in a nicer house now. In fact, their house is just as small and shabby as the one before. Dee was always a dark child, opinionated, causing her to have few friends. Once Dee was in love with a boy who quickly left town to marry a city girl just to escape Dee.

Dee arrives with a man her mother has never met. Dee's male friend calls to them with a greeting the mother does not recognize, apparently happy to see them. Dee greets them with smiles and hugs. Dee informs her mother that she is no longer known as Dee, but as Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Dee claims that Dee is a white man's name and she will no longer be known by such a name. The mother argues that Dee was named for her Dicie, who was named for her mother and she was named for her mother, and so on so far back that the mother cannot recall how far.

The family sits down to eat and Dee asks about the butter churner. Dee wants to take the churn top and make a centerpiece for a table. Dee also wants the dasher to decorate her house, though she is not sure what she will do with it exactly. After dinner, Dee goes into her mother's bedroom and begins rifling through her trunk. Dee returns holding two quilts, both made by the mother, her sister, and her mother. The quilt pieces were made from old dresses that Dee's grandmother once wore and a tiny piece of a uniform Great Grandpa Ezra wore in the Civil War. Dee wants to take the quilts and hang them in her house. Mother tells her that she plans to give the quilts to Maggie when she marries. Dee protests, saying that Maggie would probably put them to everyday use. Mother agrees, but she sees nothing wrong with that. In fact, she insists that Maggie have the quilts. Dee insists that neither her mother nor her sister understand the heritage of those quilts. Dee leaves in anger, looking down her nose at her mother and sister's lifestyle.

Everyday Use Analysis

A mother sits in anxious excitement to see her daughter whom she has not seen for a long time. This daughter has always been ashamed of her family. It is even suggested that she might have caused the fire that burned down the family home and left Maggie, her sister, with disfiguring scars. The mother remembers how no one really liked Dee, one man even left town and married another woman to get away from her, but she is



still happy to see her again. This suggests to the reader that even though the mother does not see eye to eye with her daughter, she still loves her and wishes her well.

Dee arrives and she is fascinated by her mother's everyday tools, such as the butter churner. It never occurs to Dee that if she takes pieces of the churn to decorate her house that she will leave her mother without the means to make butter. Dee does not seem to care about anyone but herself. This becomes very clear when Dee insists on taking two of the quilts her grandmother has made because of the heritage she believes they represent. However, it is clear to the mother that the heritage they truly represent is the everyday use they were meant to perform. They are quilts to keep people warm, not items to be hung on the wall as though made in Africa by African women. Dee has embraced a heritage, but it is not her own.



The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff Summary

A woman named Hannah Kemhuff comes to Tante Rosie, a rootworker, to ask her to cast a spell on a woman. Hannah tells the story of how during the depression she and her family were starving. The government was giving out stamps to those who could prove a need to exchange for food. On the appointed day, Hannah and her family dressed in the nice clothes that were donated to them from the more wealthy families in town in order to receive their food. Hannah noticed that the other families were dressed in rags, even the ones she knew to have better clothing. Hannah was puzzled by this, but was not concerned. As they stood in line, Hannah saw her husband flirting with a woman she knew to be his lover. As they moved up in line, Hannah grew more and more angry with her husband for paying attention to this woman, especially with four children. When Hannah reached the front of the line, the woman took one look at her and her children, took their food stamps and give them to the gambler behind her. The woman said that Hannah and her children did not appear hungry and that they were only to give the food to those who clearly needed it. Everyone began to laugh, including Hannah's husband who quickly left with his lover, leaving Hannah and her children behind. All four children died soon after, even though the gambler brought Hannah some food to make amends for his part in the situation.

It is many years later, but Hannah wants revenge on the woman who refused her children food. Hannah pays Tante Rosie ten dollars to remove the smile from that woman's face. Hannah learns a spell that she says every night with Tante Rosie's apprentice. Later, the apprentice befriends the nanny working for the woman, Sarah Holley, in order to get the things needed to make the curse work. Tante Rosie needs hair, nail clippings, and biological waste from the woman in order to wipe the smile from her face. When befriending the nanny does not work, Tante Rosie instructs her apprentice to go directly to Mrs. Holley and ask for the items herself. The apprentice does, suggesting to Mrs. Holley, who claims not to believe in such curses, that she has nothing to lose by turning over the items. Mrs. Holley refuses. A few weeks later, Hannah Kemhuff dies.

Sarah Holley, however, becomes so frightened of the curse that she begins collecting every hair that falls from her head. Sarah also begins eating her own fingernail clippings. To keep her biological waste from leaving the house, Sarah begins collecting it in bags and keeping it in a closet. Sarah's obsession with stopping all of these objects from leaving the house becomes so dark that she cannot leave her bedroom. Sarah stops eating and drinking. Soon Sarah's anxiety wipes the smile from her face and she dies, alone in her smelly bedroom.



The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff Analysis

Hannah Kemhuff is a woman who loses her children in the depression because she is refused the food due to her through the food stamps program. At the same time, Hannah's husband leaves her and she is unable to find another way to support her children and provide for them. Instead of blaming her husband, or herself for dressing too well, Hannah blames the woman who misinterpreted her clothing and denied her the food. This suggests to the reader that it was easier for Hannah to blame the white woman, rather than the husband who abandoned her or the system that had prejudice built in.

Hannah wants the smile wiped from Sarah Sadler Holley's face. In order to do this, Hannah believes in the curse the rootworker promises to cast on Sarah. However, the rootworker does not cast a spell. All the rootworker does is plant the idea of a spell in Sarah's mind and allow Sarah to do all the work. Ironically enough, no one ever touches Sarah or harms her. Sarah dies because of her own beliefs and her own fears.



The Welcome Table

The Welcome Table Summary

The old black woman walks into the church, ignorant of the looks she receives from the other congregants. The pastor stops her in the vestibule and tells her this is not her church, but she ignores him. The old woman sits in a back row and sings in her head as she looks around the beautiful church. An usher tells the woman she should leave. The woman ignores him. The women of the congregation nag their husbands who eventually stand up and walk the woman out of the church, returning to celebrate God in what they believe to be their right as a white congregation.

The old black woman begins walking along the highway toward her home when she sees Jesus. The woman joins him as he walks, talking to him about a picture she has of him that she stole from a Bible belonging to a white woman, though she does not tell him it is stolen, and about her desire to worship him. They walk for miles, past the woman's house and on down the road, with the old woman talking about many things. No one from the white church knows what happened to the woman. They have heard she died of a heart attack while walking along the highway. The white people do not talk about it among themselves.

The Welcome Table Analysis

The story is told with an authorial voice. The voice tells the reader what the white congregants feel and how they act when a black woman walks into their church. The woman is unwanted even though the story implies that she worked in the homes of several of the congregants there at one point or another in her life. The narration then switches to the old woman, who ironically runs into Jesus outside the church, rather than inside where the whites believe they are worshiping Jesus and accepting his unconditional love. The old woman has received what the whites are only hoping for.



Strong Horse Tea

Strong Horse Tea Summary

Rannie Toomer has nothing but her baby boy, Snooks. Snooks has pneumonia and Rannie is afraid he is going to die. Rannie tells the mailman when he comes to deliver the circulars that she needs a doctor. The mailman only half listens to Rannie, but Rannie believes he has promised to bring a white doctor to cure her son. Rannie waits for hours for the white doctor to come, but the only person who comes is Sarah, the local rootworker. Sarah recommends some natural remedies, but Rannie insists on a white doctor to cure her son. Sarah tells Rannie that the only person the mailman was going to get was her. Rannie gives in and has Sarah examine her son. Rannie believes the boy seems better just from having Sarah look at him. However, Sarah tells Rannie the child is dying. Sarah says the only thing that might help at this point is horse tea. Sarah sends Rannie out to get some. While Rannie is chasing the neighbor's horse, collecting its urine in her shoe, the child dies.

Strong Horse Tea Analysis

The setting is once again important in this story. The mailman is white and he does not think well of Rannie, even though he has always been kind to her. In fact, the mailman thinks Rannie is ignorant and cannot imagine asking a white doctor to waste his time on Rannie's child. When the mailman promises to help, he means getting Sarah, the rootworker, not a doctor. Rannie has put her trust in this mailman, but he lets her down because of his own ignorance and prejudice against Rannie's color. Due to the delay of Rannie waiting for the white doctor, her son becomes so ill that nothing can save him. However, Sarah offers hope, sending her away so that she will not be there when her child dies. The reader is unclear if this is meant to be merciful or if Sarah is attempting to teach Rannie a lesson for her trust in the white man, but whichever it was Rannie still must face a future without her child.



Entertaining God

Entertaining God Summary

Fifteen year old John has taken a gorilla from its cage in the Bronx zoo and walked it up a hill overlooking the back of the zoo. The gorilla has been drugged, therefore he is placid, but John expects the drug to wear off soon. John builds a fire and begins toasting bread over it, saying a prayer with each piece. When all the bread is burned, John gathers it together and presents it to the gorilla. The gorilla awards him by killing him.

In the South, John's father, who is divorced from John's mother, is preparing for an impending tornado with his new wife and two small children. John's father has joined his new wife's faith, adopting the last name of X even though he is afraid his son will not be able to find him if he should ever want to. John's father thinks about John and the last time he saw him, ten years ago. The boy had been excited to get to the zoo for some unknown reason. Now John's father takes his two small children and hides them in the refrigerator, praying that they at least survive the storm and are rescued.

In the east, John's mother has become a radical poet. John's mother began writing poetry after her son's death, about her son. John's mother never meant for the poetry to be seen as radical, but is not upset that it is. John's mother, who was once a librarian, now makes her living presenting this dark poetry in lecture halls to people who appear ashamed or embarrassed by her writing. John's mother often imagines John is there listening and that he walks out of the hall with her every night.

Entertaining God Analysis

This story is a three part story that is told from the point of view of three separate characters all connected by the first character. John, the first character, commits suicide by gorilla after offering the gorilla some kind of religious offering. The reader is not clear what the purpose of this religious ceremony is, but understands that death is John's intention. Then the story shifts to the father who is facing a tornado that is sure to kill him. The father thinks of all his children as he faces down the storm, praying that his youngest children will survive. The mother, in the third point of view, has profited off her son's death, making his death the subject of poems that are her way of making a living. The mother misses her son deeply, but never truly accepted him because he looked so much like his father. This story appears to be about parental love, but it also has a theme of prejudice in which the father and mother dislike each other due to their appearances and both join movements meant to better black people, while at the same time losing sight of their child and the pain he is living in.



The Diary of an African Nun

The Diary of an African Nun Summary

A young woman, who grew up in a small village in Uganda, lives as a nun in a local convent. The nun is beautiful and often asked by the convent's frequent guests why she has chosen to become a nun. The woman is devoted to her life as a nun and to her spiritual husband. However, at night the nun often hears the drum beats of the local villagers and imagines herself joining them. The woman wants to be among her people, to dance with them, and make love with a human male. However, she knows this is against her religion and the new way of the world. The nun knows that it is her job to teach the villagers to let go of their pagan ways and to embrace the Catholic Church and Western Civilization.

The Diary of an African Nun Analysis

The nun in this story is a Ugandan who has grown up around the Catholic Church and therefore believes that her choice to become a nun was the right choice. However, the woman hears the drum beats of the villagers she left behind and wants to return to them. It is in this woman's soul to be among her people and participate in their pagan rituals. Unfortunately, the woman believes that the future lies with Western Civilization, therefore she must not only ignore this calling in herself, but she must encourage others to do it as well. This leaves this woman in a dark place that leaves her conflicted and frustrated. It is a sad story of choosing a future over heritage, over what is considered everyday life to some and pagan to others. It is a difficult choice.



The Flowers

The Flowers Summary

Myop walks from the pigpen, into the fields, to a stream where wildflowers grow. Myop walks along, enjoying the warm summer day, picking flowers. Suddenly Myop steps into the skull of a man. The man's body lies on the ground uncovered, his head separate from his body. At the base of his skull is a single rose that grows up in the circle of a noose. Myop lies her flowers on the ground. Summer is over.

The Flowers Analysis

The story is a very short one, but it paints a vivid picture. The writer uses the setting to express this child's carefree life until the moment something dark intrudes. The child comes upon the skeleton of a man who was hung, for what crime the reader can only guess. It is implied that the man was hung because of racial prejudice. The man was never buried, but a beautiful rose grows out of the noose that ended his life. This single rose offers some hope even as the child becomes aware that her carefree summer has just ended.



We Drink the Wine in France

We Drink the Wine in France Summary

The French teacher at a boarding school for black girls looks over his students, comparing one to the other, but focusing on Harriet in particular. The French teacher believes Harriet is ignorant, but her other teachers claim she is very bright, often reading difficult books that are not required reading. Later that day, Harriet goes out in a car with a boy and has unsatisfying sex. Afterward, Harriet must rush back to the school to return to her dorm before the gates are locked. Alone, the teacher has lunch, a bland meal to treat an ulcer. The teacher looks over a magazine article about him that tells how his family was taken to a concentration camp and his wife and children were killed. The teacher now feels like a criminal for having survived.

Alone in her room, Harriet imagines the French teacher comes to her, finally comfortable enough to reveal the tattoo on his wrist and tell her what it is for. Harriet then imagines the French teacher makes love to her until she is interrupted by the house mother. At the same time, the French teacher dreams of Harriet, of taking her with him when he goes to Mexico. The next day, Harriet goes to French class having learned the wrong lesson. The teacher runs her through the correct lesson before settling behind his desk for the last time.

We Drink the Wine in France Analysis

This story is something of a romance between a damaged man and a young, damaged girl. The girl is a black child who has been injured by prejudice and labeled because of her skin. Even the man who believes himself to be in love with her believes her to be ignorant despite evidence to the contrary. The man is a survivor of the concentration camps who believes himself to be a criminal simply for surviving his ordeal. These two think of each other and imagine a life together, a life that might be better if the two could find love in one another. However, the story suggests they will never be together even as the teacher resigns from his job and prepares to leave the country.



To Hell with Dying

To Hell with Dying Summary

Mr. Sweet is a diabetic and alcoholic who lives next door to the narrator. Mr. Sweet was once an ambitious man, but when he discovered the white man would not let him achieve his dreams, he became a guitar player so that he could say he could do one thing extraordinarily well. Mr. Sweet was married once, but his wife left him, so he lived alone all his life. From time to time, Mr. Sweet would take to his bed and everyone would believe he was dying. The narrator's father would take his children to Mr. Sweet's and declare that he could not die because the children needed him. The narrator would then kiss his face until Mr. Sweet would open his eyes. Then the children would play the guitar until Mr. Sweet was able to get out of bed. This would occur again and again, giving the narrator a sense of power over Mr. Sweet's life and death.

The narrator grew up loving Mr. Sweet and believing he would never die. However, when she is a doctorate student, the narrator gets word that Mr. Sweet is once more dying. The narrator rushes to his side, half believing she can stop his death, but finds that she cannot stop it this time. Mr. Sweet dies, revealing to the narrator that those she loves are truly mortal.

To Hell with Dying Analysis

Mr. Sweet is a kind old man who has befriended the neighbor and their children. Mr. Sweet is something of a hypochondriac who likes to think he is dying. Mr. Sweet is so good at this he even convinces the doctor. However, the narrator and her brother are always able to bring Mr. Sweet back, giving them the mistaken idea that they can control life and death. The narrator eventually learns this is not true, but she is happy that she has had Mr. Sweet in her life to teach her what is most important.



Characters

Roselily appears in Roselily

Roselily is a woman who has had four children, one of whom she gave to the father because he was more educated than she and able to provide for the child better than she believed she could. Roselily struggles to care for her remaining three children working in a clothing factory. Roselily dislikes the work and worries that she is not providing well enough for her children. Therefore, when a man comes along and offers to marry her, Roselily jumps at the chance.

As Roselily marries her fiancé, she thinks about all the respectability he can offer her. Roselily does not love her fiancé and she does not understand his religion, but when he told her she would not have to work anymore, she was more than happy to commit herself to him. Now Roselily thinks about the life they will have together and the fact that she will have to keep her head covered in public because of her husband's religion. Roselily wonders how the women she grew up with will react to this, but again thinks of the fact that she will never have to work again.

Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III appears in Her Sweet Jerome

Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III is an ugly, uneducated young woman who has married a schoolteacher she deeply admires. Mrs. Washington works as a hairdresser in a shop behind her father's funeral home, proud that she provides for herself and her husband without any help from her father. Mrs. Washington is deeply in love with her husband, but finds it a struggle to make him stay home with her most nights. Jerome seems more interested in his books and his friends than his wife, as shown by the fact that he treats his wife with disdain and often spends his time away from the home.

Mrs. Washington begins to hear rumors that her husband is cheating on her. Mrs. Washington begins going around town, asking strange women if they are sleeping with her husband. Mrs. Washington becomes so obsessed with the idea that her husband is cheating on her that she stops working, she stops bathing, and she begins following her husband. Mrs. Washington even walks in on some kind of meeting her husband is attending, a meeting she does not fully understand. Eventually, while searching her bedroom to find a clue to her husband's lover, Mrs. Washington discovers that her husband's lover is not a person but black revolution.

Daughter appears in The Child Who Favored Daughter

Daughter is the sister of a man who has grown up to have a daughter of his own, one who is much like his beloved sister. This man loved his sister more than life, lured by



her quick charm and soft beauty. However, when Daughter has an affair with a white man, the same white man for whom her brother works in the fields, she loses favor with the family. The man watches his sister tortured by the family, strapped to a bed and expected to die. When she does not die, the family only marginally cares for her, throwing her food when they think about it. One day Daughter is more like her old self and she charms her brother into setting her free. Immediately, Daughter commits suicide, leaving her brother to live with his role in her actions.

Dee appears in Everyday Use

Dee is the daughter of a poor woman. Dee never liked the home in which she lived or the disrespectability of being poor. Dee's mother always knew she was different and she worked hard to send Dee away from their world. One day Dee returns and she has a new name and a new opinion of her mother's lifestyle. Dee has embraced her African heritage and she has taken an African name to reflect this. Dee takes from her mother parts of a butter churn in order to decorate her home, never stopping to think of how her mother is to make her butter without these objects.

Dee attempts to take from her mother's home two quilts created by her grandmother and aunt. Dee's mother has promised these items to her other daughter on her wedding day. Dee argues that her sister will only put the quilts into everyday use, using the quilts until they fall apart. Dee says that the quilts are part of African heritage and should be hung up for display. Dee's mother sees nothing wrong with the everyday use of the quilts and insists on keeping the quilts for her other daughter's wedding day. Dee leaves in a huff, insisting her mother and sister do not fully understand their heritage.

Hannah Kemhuff appears in The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff

Hannah Kemhuff was a young mother during the Depression. Hannah's husband often cheated on her during this time, leaving Hannah humiliated and desperate. Also during this time, the poor family would often take donations of clothing from the more wealthy families in town. One day Hannah, her husband, and her children stand in line with food stamps to collect the food the government was offering families who could prove themselves in need. Hannah and her children wear some of their nice clothing, determined not to lose their dignity in this time of need. However, the clothing contrasts with the rags other families are wearing and leave Hannah puzzled as to why some of her neighbors, whom she knows have nicer clothes, would go out in public in such rags.

As Hannah stands in line, she notices her husband making eyes at a young woman she is aware he has had an affair with. Hannah becomes upset, but keeps quiet. When Hannah reaches the front of the line, the white woman handing out the food announces that Hannah looks too rich to need free food. The woman takes Hannah's food stamps and gives them to the gambler behind her. Then the woman laughs. Hannah's husband and his lover laugh as well, going off together. Hannah is left alone with her children,



who are starving. Over the next few days, Hannah watches as one by one her children die.

Sarah Marie Sadler Holley appears in The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff

Sarah Marie Sadler Holley is a white woman who believes herself to be friendly with blacks. Sarah often gives young blacks jobs on her farm and works with charities that benefit blacks. Sarah's favorite pastime is to gossip with young black women. During the depression, Sarah works handing out food to poor families in need. However, Sarah has a cruel streak and she once denies food to a mother with three children because she is dressed better than the other people in line.

One day, someone goes to Sarah and tells her that the black woman she refused food to, Hannah Kemhuff, has asked a black rootworker to put a spell on Sarah. This woman tells Sarah that in order to make the spell work they need hair and biological waste from Sarah. Sarah claims not to believe in these spells, but she soon makes herself ill trying to keep these items from leaving her home. Sarah locks herself in her bedroom and stores her waste in a closet to keep it from leaving the house. Soon Sarah's emotional state makes her very sick and she dies, just as the rootworker promised Hannah Kemhuff she would.

Rannie Toomer appears in Strong Horse Tea

Rannie Toomer is a young, unattractive woman who has only one person in her life that matters to her, her son Snooks. When Snooks becomes deathly ill with pneumonia, Rannie Toomer wants a white doctor to come and save him. Rannie asks the white mailman to get a doctor, but instead he enlists the help of the local rootworker. When Rannie realizes the doctor is not coming, she resigns herself to taking the help of the rootworker. However, Rannie has waited too long. The rootworker knows this, so she comes up with a way to get Rannie out of the house for a little while and to give her some hope. The rootworker has Rannie collect horse urine to feed to her child, promising her it could help the child. While Rannie is chasing a horse in a field and collecting its urine in her shoe, the child dies.

Myop appears in The Flowers

Myop is a young girl who is exploring the woods on a warm summer day. Myop is enjoying the nature and the freedom of being on her own instead of locked in a school room. Myop is like any other child on a summer afternoon. However, Myop comes across a beautiful rose that reminds her she is not like any other child, but a black child in a country where blacks are discriminated against. This rose is growing out of the skull of a man who was hung from one of the beautiful trees surrounding Myop. Suddenly the peace of that summer afternoon is gone for Myop.



Harriet appears in We Drink the Wine in France

Harriet is a young woman who attends a boarding school for black girls. One of Harriet's classes is French, with a middle-aged, white teacher. Harriet enjoys the class but she is always a lesson behind, leaving the teacher with the impression that she is not intelligent. However, Harriet is very bright in all her other classes and often reads long and difficult books that are not required reading in her courses.

Harriet is blooming into a woman and enjoys the company of boys. Harriet makes love with a boy in his car, but is not impressed with the experience. However, Harriet begins fantasizing about her French teacher, curious what it would be like to be with a grown man, a man who knows how to be gentle. Harriet believes this to only be a fantasy, unaware that her French teacher is having the same fantasies.

Mr. Sweet Little appears in To Hell with Dying

Mr. Sweet Little is a diabetic and alcoholic who lives next door to a family with several small children. Mr. Sweet often becomes ill due to his chronic conditions and will lie in bed, convincing everyone that he is about to die. However, his neighbor knows better and allows his children to kiss Mr. Sweet all over his face, bringing him back to life. Then the children play music on Mr. Sweet's guitar to lead him back to good health. This happens many, many times throughout the narrator's childhood until one day she gets a call to come to Mr. Sweet's side when she is at college. The narrator arrives to discover she can no longer bring Mr. Sweet back from the edge of death. Mr. Sweet dies this time, leaving the narrator his guitar and a lifetime of sweet memories.



Objects/Places

Writings appears in 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?'

The narrator of 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?' wants to be a writer. When she meets a man who claims to be a writer, she shares with her over twenty years of writing. The man compliments her, assuring her that her writing is good. Then he steals it and has it published under his own name.

House appears in 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?'

The narrator's husband from 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?', Ruel, believes the one thing they can aspire to is buying a brick home in which to raise a family. After the narrator attempts to kill her husband, he places her in a mental hospital and buys his dream home, hoping it will allow them to move on from the past and begin their family. Ruel does not know that his wife is using birth control.

Books appears in Her Sweet Jerome

Mrs. Washington finds many, many books under her husband's side of the bed that she has never paid attention to before, pleased with the books only because they keep her husband home. However, when Mrs. Washington reads the titles, she realizes why her husband is no longer committed to their marriage.

Letter appears in The Child Who Favored Daughter

The father in The Child Who Favored Daughter finds a letter from his own daughter to her white lover. This reminds the father of his sister's affair with the white plantation owner. The father becomes enraged and he beats his daughter before mutilating her and leaving her for dead.

Quilts appears in Everyday Use

Dee, in Everyday Use, wants two quilts created by her grandmother and aunt that contain fragments of clothing her grandmother once wore and a small section of the uniform her great-grandfather wore in the Civil War. Dee believes these quilts are part of her African heritage and should be displayed, not used. However, Dee's mother believes the quilts were created for use and is happy to give them to her other daughter on her wedding day because she will put them to everyday use.



Hair, Nail Clippings, and Biological Waste appears in The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff

Hannah Kemhuff wants revenge against the white woman who denied her food during the depression, resulting in the deaths of her children. When that woman learns that her hair, fingernail clippings, and biological waste will be required to make the spell work, she becomes obsessed with protecting these things from leaving her home, soon causing herself to die from the emotional stress this causes.

Strong Horse Tea appears in Strong Horse Tea

Rannie Toomer is told the only way to save her child is to feed him strong horse tea. Rannie is willing to do anything, so she collects the horse urine for her child, unaware that he has already died.

Gorilla appears in Entertaining God

In Entertaining God, John steals a gorilla from the Bronx Zoo in order to conduct some sort of religious ritual. When John approaches the gorilla, it kills him.

Poetry appears in Entertaining God

Upon the death of her son in Entertaining God, John's mother begins writing poetry about his death that she represents as black radical poetry.

Refrigerator appears in Entertaining God

As a tornado bears down on the family of John's father, he and his second wife hide their young children in the refrigerator, hoping they will be saved and rescued when the storm has passed.

Rose appears in The Flowers

While walking in the woods on a bright, summer day, a young girl finds a single rose growing in the circle of a noose that was used to hang a black man.

Guitar appears in To Hell with Dying

In To Hell with Dying, Mr. Sweet often played his guitar for the neighbor children and they would play it for him to bring him out of his dying spells. When Mr. Sweet dies for a final time, he leaves the guitar to his neighbor's daughter, now a college graduate.



Themes

Betrayal

Betrayal is a theme in several of the short stories in this collection. The first clear theme of betrayal appears in the story, 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?' In this story, the narrator trusts her lover with her private writings, taking from him the encouragement she has not been able to get from her husband. However, this lover takes this trust and crushes it when he uses the stories and ideas as his own, publishing them under his own name. The narrator is deeply disappointed in his actions, but instead of punishing him, the narrator takes out her anger on her husband, Ruel, by attempting to cut his head off.

Betrayal is also a theme in Her Sweet Jerome. Mrs. Washington has married a man she deeply admires and believes she can convince to love her despite his indifference toward her. As time goes by, Mrs. Washington becomes aware of rumors that Jerome is cheating on her. Mrs. Washington looks all over for her husband's lover, only to discover his lover is not a human, but the black revolution. Mrs. Washington is so devastated by this and the idea that she cannot fight this lover that she sets the house on fire and kills herself.

The father in The Child who Favored Daughter also feels betrayed. The father was first betrayed by his sister, Daughter, who had an affair with the white plantation owner. Later, as a grown man, the father discovers that his own daughter is having an affair with a white man. The father's sense of betrayal by Daughter is transferred to his own child and he punishes her in a cruel, horrific fashion.

Betrayal can also be found in the stories The Welcome Table, in which a black woman is thrown out of a white church, in The Diary of an African Nun, in which a nun is forced to turn from her heritage to embrace her religion, and The Flowers, in which a young girl comes face to face with racial prejudice when she comes upon the skeleton of a black man who was hung. All these stories express some kind of betrayal perpetrated against the main character by someone they love or a society they once trusted. For this reason, betrayal is a theme of this collection.

Discovering One's Heritage

In the story, Everyday Use, a young woman has escaped the poverty of her childhood and embraced the African heritage of her people. This woman returns home and begins collecting items her mother uses in her everyday life to put on display in her home as samples of the African Heritage. In this way, Dee believes she is embracing her people and honoring them, but in truth she is only making life more difficult for her hard-working mother.

In Her Sweet Jerome, Jerome believes he is embracing his heritage by rising up against white oppression and working within a revolution to empower the black man. This belief



injures his wife, making her realize her husband could never be hers and leading her to suicide.

In *The Diary of an African Nun*, a young woman born and raised in Africa has become a nun in the Catholic Church, living in a convent in her native village. However, this young woman can hear the drums of her people beat every night as they celebrate life through music and sex. This woman longs to be among her people, but knows that the future lies with Western Civilization and she has vowed to her God to convert these people to the ways of the west. This woman, while both embracing her heritage and turning from it, is left in a dark confusion that leaves her wondering if what she is doing is robbing her people of their happy, carefree lives.

Love

Love is a motivator in many people's lives. In these stories, love is the motive for many of the characters that populate them. In *Her Sweet Jerome*, Mrs. Washington is so in love with her husband that she is willing to kill any woman who might be his lover. In *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, Hannah so loves her children that she seeks revenge against the woman she blames for their death rather than the husband who left her. In *Strong Horse Tea*, a woman is so desperate to save her child she is willing to collect horse urine to cure his illness.

The Welcome Table expresses a different kind of love. In this story, a woman goes to a white church to celebrate God and is thrown out by the horrified patrons. This woman walks in the street and finds Jesus walking toward her. Together, this woman and Jesus walk the highway until the woman is killed by the strain. This woman has done this out of a love for God and his son and a desire to be a worthy Christian.

To Hell With Dying is yet another example of love as a theme. In this story, the narrator grows up next door to a kind alcoholic who often takes to his bed with the conviction that he is dying. However, this young woman kisses him into consciousness and plays the guitar until he is saved from death and resumes being the fun-loving neighbor everyone so loves. In the end, this girl's love cannot save her beloved neighbor, but her love for him offers him the love and comfort any man deserves on his death bed. Due to this story and the others featuring intense relationships, love is a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The majority of the stories in this collection are told in the third person omniscient point of view. In *Roselily*, the narrator is a young woman who is getting married, while *Her Sweet Jerome's* narrator is a married woman who believes her husband is cheating on her. Some of the third person narration also includes an authorial voice, such as *The Welcome Table* in which the author reports on what the white church patrons know or later discover about the black woman they kicked out of their church. A small portion of the stories are told in the first person point of view. *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?* is told from the point of view of an aspiring writer from a journal she wrote about the man who betrayed her trust. *To Hell With Dying* is a reminiscence of a young woman recalling the man who lived next door to her throughout her childhood and whose death she controlled.

The points of view in this collection of short stories are varied and unique. The third person point of view offers a unique look into the lives of black woman, sometimes offering a view from the eyes of white people who do not fully understand the difficulties and emotions of these people they have often oppressed. The author does this in an attempt to allow the reader to see the experiences of her characters through many perspectives, not just one. The first person points of view are more intimate, allowing the reader an even deeper look into the lives of these characters and allowing a degree of sympathy that might be missing from a different point of view. Finally, the authorial voice that often comes into these stories gives the reader a perspective that might not have been available from a character's point of view, making the stories more complex.

Setting

The stories in this collection are all set in the 1950s and 1960s. The stories have varying locations, some set in the south while others are set in New York City, while one is set in Africa. The locations of these stories are only mentioned when the setting has an impact on the plot, such as Africa in *The Diary of An African Nun*. Africa in this story is important to the plot because it serves as motive for the nun's thoughts and actions. The time period is more important as a part of the setting than the location of the stories because these stories are set in a time period when racial tensions are at a critical point in the United States. This racial tension plays a role in several of the stories, such as *The Welcome Table* and *My Sweet Jerome*, because the activities of the time period have a direct impact on the plot.

The settings of these stories work because the author plays on the political and racial atmosphere of her chosen time period and uses it as a source of conflict in her plots. In *The Welcome Table*, a white church congregation throws a black woman out of their church despite the fact that this woman has been a dutiful servant in many of their



homes. This action would not be condoned in modern times and therefore could not have made a realistic story if set in modern time. My Sweet Jerome is about a man who has embraced the black revolution, a movement by young blacks in the 1960s to use violence to force whites to allow blacks equal rights. This movement could not have been a source of conflict in this story if the story were set in an earlier or later time period. For these reasons, and many more, the settings of these stories work well within the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the stories in this collection is an educated, but simple English. The writer uses common words that readers of all ages will understand, but does so with a grammar that suggests a high level of education. The author also uses dialogue that reflects slang and a lack of education in order to reflect the backgrounds of her characters. The author uses this less educated language sparingly, creating a great impact on the reader when this technique is encountered. Finally, the author uses some foreign phrases, most notably in the story We Drink the Wine in France because the story is about a French teacher's obsession with a young black girl.

The language of these stories works because the language is simple enough for the youngest readers to comprehend, but formal enough to give the stories the feel of literature, of importance. The author utilizes the slang of poor blacks in some of her stories because her characters are often blacks who live in poverty and who have not had access to the higher education many of America's youth now take for granted. This slang gives a sense of authenticity to the author's characters and gives her stories an aura of truth. Finally, the author uses some foreign phrases in her stories, some that are not clearly explained, but all of which are easy to comprehend due to the context in which they are used.

Structure

The story collection is divided into thirteen individual stories. Each story has a title of its own. Within the stories there are at times breaks that are set apart with numbers. Some of the stories are formatted to represent diary entries or segments from a book and are marked to denote the different entries. Finally, some of the stories include quotes from letters written by the characters in the story or traditional songs that are relevant to the story.

The stories are written in exposition combined with dialogue. Many of the stories include internal dialogue as the author explains her characters' actions through their thoughts and emotions. Each story contains one complete plot, with a beginning, middle, and an end. The plots are all satisfactorily concluded by the stories' ends, although some might have an ambiguous ending that causes the reader to sit back and think the story through before understanding the author's purpose.



Quotes

"She dreams; dragging herself across the world." Roselily, p. 3.

"I sit here by the window in a house with a thirty-year mortgage, writing in this notebook, looking down at my Helena Rubenstein hands...and why not?"
'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?', p. 10.

"Then I plugged in one of his chain saws and tried to slice off his head. This failed because of the noise." 'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?', p. 21.

"If her husband laughed at her high heels as she teetered and minced off to church on Sunday mornings, with her hair greased and curled and her new dress bunching up at the top of her girdle, she pretended his eyes were approving." Her Sweet Jerome, p. 27.

"'Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!' she said. 'She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.'" Everyday Use, p. 57.

"The constant anxiety lest a stray strand of hair be lost and the foul odor of the house soon brought to the hands a constant seeking motion, to the eyes a glazed and vacant stare, and to the mouth a tightly puckered frown, one which only death might smooth." The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff, p. 80.

"The protection and promise of God's impartial love grew more not less desirable as the sermon gathered fury and lashed itself out above their penitent heads." The Welcome Table, p. 84.

"She was not married. Was not pretty. Was not anybody much. And he was all she had." Strong Horse Tea, p. 88.

"They moved as one person will move, their children in their arms, toward the refrigerator. They threw out the food, crammed the children in." Entertaining God, p. 109.

"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, p. 118.

"It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil." The Flowers, p. 120.

"The magic of Mr. Sweet lingered still in the cool steel box." To Hell with Dying, p. 138.



Topics for Discussion

Who is Roselily? What is Roselily doing as the story unfolds? Does Roselily want to do what she is doing? What reasons does Roselily give for her actions? Why did Roselily give one of her children to his father? What did Roselily hope this situation could give to her child that her other children do not have? How are Roselily's children influencing her current situation? What religion is Roselily expected to join now? How does Roselily feel about this religion?

What does the narrator of "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" feel was stolen from her? Why did the narrator take a lover? How does this reflect the narrator's feelings for her husband? How does the narrator feel when her lover leaves her? Why does the narrator attempt to kill her husband? What is the narrator doing that she feels is punishment for her husband? Why does the narrator want to punish her husband?

Why does Dee return to her mother's home in "Everyday Use"? Why does Dee take the churn top and the dasher? What does she plan to do with them? Does she wonder what her mother will do without them? Why has Dee changed her name? What does this reflect about Dee's current beliefs? Why does Dee want the quilts? Why is she astonished that her mother would allow them to be put to everyday use? Why does Dee feel that this means her mother does not appreciate her own heritage? Are the quilts part of the heritage that Dee embraces?

Who is Hannah Kemhuff in "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff"? Why does she want revenge on Sarah Holley? What has Sarah done to her? What does Hannah hope will happen to Sarah? Does it? Is it because of the spell that Hannah achieves revenge? What does Sarah do to prevent the spell from working? For what reason? Discuss the irony that appears in this story.

What is horse tea? Why is Rannie, in "Strong Horse Tea," instructed to get horse tea for her child? Will this tea save her child? Who did Rannie ask to fetch the doctor? Does this person do as she asks? Why or why not? How does this reflect the racial atmosphere of the setting? Would Rannie's child have been saved if the doctor had come? Why or why not?

In "The Flowers," who is Myop? Why is she walking through the woods? What is she doing? What is symbolized by Myop's carefree attitude? What does Myop step into as she walks? What is the significance of this item? What does the rose she sees signify? Discuss symbolism in this story.

In "To Hell With Dying," who is Mr. Sweet Little? Why does he often believe he is dying? Why is it only his young neighbors who see through his impending death? Why does even the doctor believe Mr. Sweet is dying on these occasions? How does the neighbor child help bring Mr. Sweet back from the edge of death? Why does she do this? Why can the neighbor child not help Mr. Sweet when she becomes an adult? What does the narrator learn from Mr. Sweet's final death?