

Really, Doesn't Crime Pay Study Guide

Really, Doesn't Crime Pay by Alice Walker

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Really, Doesn't Crime Pay

Really, Doesn't Crime Pay Summary

The entire story is written as out-of-sequence journal entries. Myrna, the black woman who is writing these entries in her journal, is giving a first-person account of events and people in her life. The first few journal entries occur out of order, starting in September of 1961. Myrna is sitting in her new Southern home writing in her notebook and looking down at her hands. Myrna writes about how she takes special care of her hands-in fact, all the rest of her body-and how sweet she smells. Myrna is able to indulge in this since she is not a "serious writer."

Myrna recalls how her husband Ruel first brought her to their current house. It is clear that Myrna does not like the house, or Ruel for that matter. However, out loud, Myrna agrees with Ruel that the house is beautiful. Ruel tells Myrna that now they can forget the past. Myrna does not want to forget the past, but she claims to agree with Ruel that, yes, they can forget the past in their new house. Myrna explains that "the past" is Mordecai Rich, a man whom Ruel blames for causing Myrna's breakdown. Myrna also explains that "the past" is also referring to the night in which Myrna attempted to kill Ruel with his chainsaw.

Then the journal entries go back to May 1958, where Myrna writes about Mordecai Rich. Mordecai is a vagabond from the North who writes down his impressions of the South. Mordecai gives Myrna a hard time for being married to Ruel. Ruel works in a store and raises 100 acres of peanuts. Ruel has never been out of Hancock County except when he served in the war. He married Myrna because although her skin is brown, she looks French or Asian. Mordecai starts visiting Myrna more and more, and Myrna is drawn to Mordecai because he is a writer. Ruel is annoyed that Mordecai is hanging around so much. When Myrna tells this to Mordecai, he asks if she minds his coming around, and he places his hand on her breast. Myrna attempts to rebuke him by stating she's married, but she knows that this will not stop Mordecai. Myrna knows that Mordecai is interested in her since he found out she wants to be a writer.

Myrna was hiding and writing in her notebook when Mordecai found her one day. He took the notebook from her and read her latest entry. Myrna has written about Ruel's opinion of her writing: "No wife of mine is going to embarrass me with a lot of foolish, vulgar stuff." Ruel wants Myrna to spend her time going shopping or having a baby instead of writing. In apparent submission, Myrna goes shopping and buys excessive amounts of makeup, face cream, and so on. The whole time Myrna is shopping she grieves for her lost story. Myrna only writes outlines of her stories now, she considers them "dead in embryo," for they never have a chance to fully develop. Myrna feels that she has stopped writing complete stories out of cowardice and that she has a heart of a slave.



Mordecai asks to see Myrna's story. Therefore, Myrna lets him read her story about a one-legged woman. Mordecai is impressed by her writing and becomes her lover. Myrna does not love him, but her body is able to respond to him like it never has before. Mordecai praises her intelligence and the depth of her writing, and Myrna shows him all of her writings, which span 20 years. Mordecai goes through it all and then selects three of her notebooks and asks if he can take them to see if her stories can be published. Myrna is flattered and lets Mordecai take the notebooks; she is already dreaming of being a famous writer and leaving the town, Ruel, and everybody else behind.

They continue their affair for a week and then Mordecai stops coming and is nowhere to be found. Myrna searches for him to no avail. Myrna begins to doubt Mordecai's feelings for her and wonders what he really thought of her. Myrna falls into a depression and lets everything go—the house, herself; she starts to feel numb. Ruel sees the change in Myrna and confesses to her that he desperately wants a child. Myrna is ambivalent about having a child but agrees. Myrna's depression continues, and she contemplates suicide.

Ruel convinces Myrna to go to the doctor to see how she can become pregnant faster. While at the doctor's office, she looks through a magazine and discovers her story about a one-legged woman. Although some of the details have been changed, Myrna knows that it is her story. The magazine reports that the author of the story is Mordecai Rich. The magazine also reports that Mordecai has a new book coming out.

A few days later, after Myrna and Ruel make love, she washes the feel of him off her body while he sleeps. Myrna then takes Ruel's chainsaw and tries to decapitate him. Myrna fails to kill Ruel because the noise of the chainsaw wakes him up. After this incident, Myrna is hospitalized.

The journal entries jump back to September 1961. Myrna writes that she has been out of the hospital for about a year. Ruel is still attempting to impregnate Myrna, but she is secretly taking birth control pills to keep this from happening. Myrna derives pleasure from denying Ruel a child. Outwardly, she becomes the perfect wife. She makes herself beautiful and sweet smelling, fixes her husband dinner, and lays unresisting as Ruel makes love to her. She says yes to whatever Ruel asks. Ruel is unhappy and has realized Myrna is doing things to break him down. Myrna shops twice a day for clothes and items she never intends to use. She amuses herself by making herself pretty. When Ruel has finally had enough of Myrna, she plans to tell him how long she has been on the Pill. Myrna plans to leave Ruel and her home only when she is tired of her sweet smell and beautiful hands.

Really, Doesn't Crime Pay Analysis

In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Alice Walker continues her portrayal of black men as the oppressors of black women. Not only does Walker's character Myrna have to deal with the racism she faces from living in the South, she also has to deal with her husband's and lover's sexism. In this story, there are two men who oppress Myrna, who longs to be



a writer. This story illustrates how Myrna is not allowed to write by her husband and has to continually write in secret and deny herself from developing her stories further. In this way, Myrna feels her "creations," her writings, are "dead in embryo." She feels like a coward and that she has a heart of a slave.

Myrna does not feel appreciated for her mind or talent; she feels that her husband views her and wants her to be a pretty woman with a womb and no brains. She feels like his possession, bought with a new Southern house and shopping sprees. Myrna hates her Southern home and what it represents: Ruel's dream of a new home and children. Mordecai, her lover, oppresses her by stealing her "creations" and passing them off as his own. He sabotages her chance of ever being a serious writer. Both men in the story forsake Myrna's talent and passions for their own personal gain. Ruel denies her desires to fulfill his own desire of being a father and wanting a sweet-smelling, pretty wife. Mordecai denies Myrna what she deserves out of his need to use her writings for his own benefit as a writer.

It is after Myrna's breakdown and failed attempt to kill her husband and oppressor that Myrna finds her own way to be her husband's oppressor. Myrna outwardly becomes everything he wants. Myrna especially enjoys her "Helena Rubenstein hands," hands that no serious writer would have. Knowing Ruel's desire to have a child, Myrna secretly takes birth control pills to prevent pregnancy. In this way, she is getting revenge by denying his creation as he has denied hers.



Characters

Myrna: Really, Doesn't Crime Pay

A black woman in her 30s who lives in the South. Myrna is unemployed and married to Ruel Johnson. Myrna wants to be a writer but her husband does not allow her to write; still, she writes in secret for over 20 years, but hides her work. Myrna does not write full stories anymore, only outlines of her stories, because she is a coward and feels she has a heart of a slave. Myrna resents the way Ruel treats her and her writing. She is drawn to Mordecai because he is a writer. When Mordecai finds out that Myrna is a writer and tells her how good her writing is, she is flattered. Myrna allows herself to be seduced—not out of love but out of gratitude that he accepts and appreciates her for her writing. Myrna is thankful for being seen as an intelligent author with more to offer than just her looks and her ability to make babies, but when Mordecai steals her stories, Myrna has a breakdown and attempts to kill her husband, Ruel. Myrna is hospitalized and eventually released. She does not want to forget the past. Outwardly, Myrna embodies everything Ruel wants: she shops constantly makes herself beautiful and becomes his "yes woman." Secretly, Myrna's only real pleasure is when she takes the Pill to keep from getting pregnant, denying Ruel his dream of having a child.

Ruel Johnson: Really, Doesn't Crime Pay

The 40-year-old husband of Myrna. Ruel works in a store and also raises 100 acres of peanuts. Ruel has never been out of the South (specifically, Hancock County) except when he went to fight in the war. He came home from Korea as a war hero. He married Myrna because she looks French, Korean, or Japanese. Ruel wants his wife to shop, stay pretty, and have babies for him. He blames Mordecai for Myrna's breakdown and all he wants to do is forget the past and have a child. By the end of the story Ruel, is not happy, for he's realized that Myrna is trying to wear him down with her compliance and complete ambivalence.

Mordecai Rich: Really, Doesn't Crime Pay

A skinny black man who is younger than Ruel. He is a self-professed vagabond from the North. He is in Hancock County to write impressions down of the South. Mordecai claims that he has a "cold eye" and that he is looking for Beauty and Truth. Mordecai gives Myrna a hard time for being married to Ruel. Mordecai starts hanging around Myrna, soon discovering that she writes. He reads one of her stories and is impressed by the intelligence and depth it contains, so he asks to take three of her notebooks to see if they can be published. Myrna lets him. After about a week, Mordecai leaves without telling Myrna and never contacts her again. Mordecai changes around a few details in Myrna's story and gets it published in his name. It turns out that he only used

Myrna for his own personal gain. By the end of the story, Mordecai has an upcoming book due to be released about how black women resist the creative arts.

Objects/Places

Myrna describes her hands as being "Helena Rubenstein hands." She could not have these hands if she were a "serious writer." Her hands are pretty, sweet smelling, and useless, for they do nothing.



Themes

Racism/Sexism

The dominant theme present throughout this collection is about black women who long to escape and be free but who are denied that freedom by the society they live in and by their husbands. Black men are portrayed in a negative light and are made to be the oppressors of black women.

In *Roselily*, the story foreshadows two ways in which the bride, Roselily, will be oppressed by her new husband: the marriage itself, which leads her to think of chains, ropes, and religion; and in her role as a wife, where her groom has already made clear that he is going to remake her into the wife that he wants. In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Alice Walker continues to explore this theme of black men as the oppressors of black women. Not only does Myrna have to deal with racism she faces living in the South, she also has to deal with her husband's and lover's sexism. This story illustrates how Myrna is not allowed to write by her husband, Ruel, and has to continually write in secret and deny herself from developing her stories. In *The Welcome Table*, the old black woman experiences both racism and sexism when she is kicked out of the church, and in *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, Hannah's ordeal with racism results in the starvation of her children.

Darkness of Marriage

Although the entirety of *Roselily* takes place during a wedding ceremony, Walker manages to inject darkness into this supposedly happy occasion. *Roselily* pictures Chicago as a place with black specks falling from the sky. By the end of the story, Roselily feels like there is a trapped rat in her mind scurrying to and fro. In this way, Walker injects the feeling of darkness into an event usually viewed and portrayed as happy. Walker continues to present marriage in a dark way; in *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Walker portrays the wife, Myrna, as feeling like a bought possession and having the heart of a slave, and in *Her Sweet Jerome*, the narrator is abused by her husband, while she, in turn, is obsessively jealous. Walker's view of a black marriage is imbued with darkness.

Denial of Happiness/One's True Self

Walker explores the idea of one's denial of true happiness and/or one's true self in a variety of ways. In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, Myrna denies her true passion-writing-which eventually leads to her breakdown. In *Everyday Use*, Dee tries to embrace what she believes is her heritage but ultimately denies her true history. Rannie of *Strong Horse Tea* denies the power of the remedies of her black ancestors until it is too late. In *The Diary of an African Nun*, we see the black woman's denial of her own desires in order to do her duty as a wife and do the will of her husband. However, in this case the



woman is a nun and the husband is Christ and the Catholic church. Finally, in *They Drink the Wine in France*, the French Professor denies himself the beauty he seeks in his young student Harriet because her beauty reminds him of a painful past when he was once in a concentration camp. On the other hand, Harriet denies herself happiness because she feels unworthy to match the French Professor on an intellectual level. In the end, both part ways and nothing in their lives is better for having come into contact with one another. All of these stories express the futility of denying oneself and the despair that this denial causes.



Style

Point of View

In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, the story is told in the first person by Myrna, who at first seems to be an unreliable narrator. The story is told through a series of journal entries that are out of order. It is after reading the past entries dated May 1958 that the reader finds that at least Myrna can be viewed as a reliable narrator for that period of time. By the end of the story, when the journal entries come back to the present (September 1961), the reader can see that she is a reliable narrator-if also a broken woman.

Setting

In *Really, Doesn't Crime Pay*, the setting shifts from September of 1961 to May of 1958 and then back to September of 1961. In 1961, the setting is in a new Southern home equipped with all new furniture. In 1958, the setting is Ruel and Myrna's old home where their toilet is in a wooden house in the yard. Other scenes happen outside by a creek, in a waiting room, or in a hospital. All of these places are located in Hancock County.

Language and Meaning

The language used by Ruel is less sophisticated than the language used by Myrna or Mordecai. Ruel talks about everyday things, whereas Myrna and Mordecai discuss concepts like beauty and truth and talk about other writers. Myrna is highly intelligent, but Ruel does not want her to be and does not appreciate that quality in her. He only wants Myrna to shop, keep pretty for him, and have his babies.

Structure

Walker uses journal entries to narrate the story. The journal entries are not sequential and begin in September of 1961. When Ruel mentions his desire to start over in their new house and forget the past, Myrna explains in her journal entries that the "past" refers to Mordecai Rich and the time she attempted to murder Ruel with a chainsaws. The journal entries abruptly go back to May of 1958. Myrna details her budding relationship with Mordecai Rich, a writer, and his discovery that she too writes, but writes in secret, for she is forbidden by her husband to pen any stories or write in her journal. A brief time passes; Mordecai leaves with some of Myrna's writings. Soon after, Myrna attempts to kill her husband and is hospitalized. The journal entries then switch back to September of 1961. Myrna appears to have become the empty-headed, beautiful wife that Ruel wants: she agrees with anything he says...but all is not as it appears. Myrna is attempting to break the spirit of her husband and is secretly taking birth control pills to deny Ruel his dream of becoming a father.



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?