Roselily Study Guide

Roselily by Alice Walker

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Roselily" was first published as the opening story in Alice Walker's first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973). The collection won the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and was widely and favorably reviewed. "Roselily" has been included in several important literary anthologies, including *Calling the Wind: Twentieth-Century African-American Short Stories* (1993).

The story of a rural African-American woman from Mississippi who is about to escape poverty and disgrace by marrying a man she barely knows, a Muslim from the North, it received praise from critics for giving a voice to a segment of the population that has seldom been represented in fiction. The central character is an unmarried woman with three children, aged three, four, and five, and Walker depicts her with respect and compassion.

The prospects for Roselily finding happiness in her loveless marriage seem dim; she is one of the many female characters in *In Love and Trouble* who suffer not only from financial hardship but also from the imbalance of power between men and women. In part because of her own disillusionment with the inequalities that she faced when the Civil Rights Movement did not lead to a significant increase in equality for African-American women, Walker's work is frequently concerned with women's struggles and misguided loyalties. In an interview published in the prose collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Walker described the central characters in *In Love and Trouble*: "thirteen women— mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful, and magnificent—try to live with the loyalty to black men that characterizes all of their lives. For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world."

Author Biography

Born and raised in a poor community in the rural South, Alice Malsenior Walker may have seemed an unlikely candidate to become such a significant writer in the twentieth century. Yet it was her experiences among poor black folk, her ear for their language, and her respect for their dignity, that gave her the material and the reason for her writing. She was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth child in a family of sharecroppers. When she was eight, one of her brothers accidentally shot her in the eye with a BB gun. The resulting scar left her shaken and shy, and she began to spend more time alone, reading.

Walker graduated at the top of her high school class, earning a scholarship to Spelman College, a college in Atlanta for African-American women. After two and a half years there, she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, where she was one of only six black students. When she returned from a summer trip to Kenya in 1964 and discovered she was pregnant, she fell into a depression that nearly drove her to suicide. Her father had said that his daughters would be turned from the family if they had children out of wedlock. Instead of killing herself, she procured an illegal abortion, and turned to writing poetry to relieve the pressure of her anxieties. These poems became her wellreceived first collection, *Once: Poems* (1968).

Between the writing and the publication of *Once,* Walker graduated from college and began to work with the Civil Rights Movement, helping African Americans register to vote in Georgia and Mississippi. It was then that she met a white lawyer from New York, Mel Leventhal, whom she later married. She was pregnant with her husband's child when she attended the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. One week later, she suffered a miscarriage. The next year, 1969, saw the birth of her only child, a daughter Rebecca.

Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* was published in 1970, followed three years later by *In Love and Trouble* (1973), the collection that includes "Roselily." Both books drew on her own background as a black woman struggling with poverty, sexism, and racism—a theme that would turn up again in *The Color Purple* (1982). For that novel, Walker won the National Book Award, and became the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She has continued to write and publish fiction, poetry, and essays, and is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed writers of her generation.

Plot Summary

The story begins with the opening words of the traditional wedding ceremony, "Dearly Beloved." The two words, italicized, hang above a paragraph of prose, with no explanation. Following the paragraph are a few more words from the ceremony, "we are gathered here." The brief story is arranged this way throughout. A paragraph or two of prose is followed by a bit of the minister's words, until two sentences from the wedding are complete: "Dearly Beloved, / we are gathered here / in the sight of God / to join this man and this woman / in holy matrimony" and "If there's anybody here that knows a reason why / these two should not be joined / together, / let him speak / or forever hold / his peace."

The eleven prose sections are spoken in the third person by a narrator who can see into the mind of Roselily, the central character. Each section reports what Roselily thinks and observes as she is being married. There is no dialogue and no real action, but simply the meandering thoughts of the central character. The story opens with Roselily daydreaming through her own wedding, seeing herself in her mother's wedding gown. It is obvious immediately that this is not the story of a joyous wedding day. The wedding party stands on the porch of Roselily's house, and the man she is marrying (he is never named) does not approve of the location.

Throughout the ceremony, cars can be heard passing by on the highway. White people drive the cars, and the men in the crowd keep looking at the passing cars in a "respectful way." For the groom, Roselily can tell, the distraction caused by the white people, and the fact that these country people in Panther Burn, Mississippi, follow the "wrong God," ruins the wedding. Roselily, who has three children, wonders what it would be like to not have them, and instantly her guilt is mixed in her mind with the guilt of not quite believing in the Christian God, and not believing in the minister's authority.

The groom, who lives in Chicago, is a Muslim, a member of the Nation of Islam. Roselily does not know much about his religion, except that she will have to cover her head and sit in a separate section for women at his place of worship. When she thinks of his religion, she imagines "ropes, chains, handcuffs." But to give her children a chance at respectability, she is willing to change her life. She had earlier pinned her hopes on the father of her fourth child, a married Harvard graduate from New England who had come to Mississippi to work in the Civil Rights Movement. He had been unable to adapt to life without Bach and chess, and had returned to New England with his son, telling his wife that he had found the child. Roselily wonders how her son will fare in the North.

She feels distant from her future husband. His religion and his manner seem to carry "stiff severity," and she wonders whether she will be a new person when she is made to wear a veil. If she becomes a new person, what will become of her memories? Remembering her dead mother, the hard life of her "gray old" father who stands before her, and her grandparents in the cemetery, she feels them all pulling her back. She feels too old for big changes. When she reaches Chicago she will have an entirely new life.

She will not have to work in a factory any more, but will be expected to stay at home and raise more children. She wonders whether that kind of life will be full enough.

Now she wishes she had asked more questions before agreeing to marry this man. Perhaps she was too impatient for a new life in a new place. She was eager to be "Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free!" Yet she worries now about the kind of freedom she will find "in robe and veil." Her future husband loves her, or he loves what he will turn her into, but she does not know whether she loves him. Is she moving toward freedom, or toward a new kind of entrapment? She does not know what she feels.

When the wedding is over there is a kiss, and the sound of firecrackers and car horns. As the witnesses cheer and give their congratulations, the groom turns his attention inward, away from the crowd and away from his wife. She imagines how it will be later, when they are driving through the night to Chicago. She feels ignorant, inadequate, but he offers no reassurance: "He is standing in front of her. In the crush of well-wishing people, he does not look back."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This short story by Alice Walker is written in a stream-of-consciousness style. It is set in Mississippi, at the wedding ceremony of the main character, Roselily. The story has been broken into segments with each segment beginning with a line from the wedding ceremony.

The wedding is being held on the front porch of Roselily's house. There is traffic passing by on the nearby highway, interfering with the tranquility of the ceremony. Roselily thinks that the white people in the cars are on their way to some place more exciting than this wedding; in contrast, the groom feels as though they are usurping the wedding. Roselily feels as though she is in a dream, moving through quicksand. She feels like a little girl dressed up in her mother's wedding dress.

The groom does not come from the same community as Roselily, and he thinks that Roselily and the people at the ceremony believe in the "wrong God." Roselily knows that she holds a different religious belief than her husband, but she thinks that her religious beliefs are also different from those of her friends and family. As the preacher performs the ceremony, Roselily finds that she has to pretend that the preacher is a man of God because she believes that God is actually a timid black boy.

Roselily has three children living with her, but she finds herself wishing she did not. While she is thinking about her children, she squeezes the flowers in her hand and imagines choking the life from them. When she realizes what she is doing, she stops and is ashamed of her thoughts. She does love her children and knows that the stress of her difficult life makes her think she does not want them.

Roselily thinks about the fact that she will be moving to Chicago with her new husband. She envisions her new home and sees it as a chance to build a proper life and earn respect. She believes it is an opportunity for her children as well.

Roselily thinks about her fourth child, a son, who lives in New England with his father. Roselily believes that his father was a good, but weak man, as he was not able to live with the poverty and lack of opportunity in Roselily's life. Roselily wonders if her son will ever return to see Mississippi, or if he will forget where he came from.

When the preacher reaches the part of the ceremony: "If there's anybody here that knows a reason why," Roselily considers the meaning of these words. She does not believe anyone would ever admit to knowing a reason. The people at her wedding understand that marriage often occurs for reasons other than love.

Roselily thinks of her children again and believes that they will have a better life once she is married. She realizes that her memories are interfering with her thoughts of the

future. As it is her wedding day, she wants to think only of her future, but she does not know how to suppress her memories.

Roselily thinks about her dead mother. Her father and sisters are present at the wedding, though she thinks that her father looks like a man who wants to run away. Her giggling sisters make Roselily feel old. She thinks that perhaps her husband would be happier marrying one of her sisters because they are still young and ready to try new things. She thinks about death and ghosts.

Roselily knows that once she is married, she will no longer have to work because her husband has said that her place will be in the home. Because she has led a hard, laboring life, part of Roselily thinks of this as a rest; however, another part of her wonders what she will do once she is rested. She knows that she will have more children and raising these children will be her new job. However, she does not find this to be reassuring.

As the wedding ceremony ends, Roselily admits that she might have jumped into the marriage too fast. She knows that she agreed to marry because she wanted to escape from the life she led. She was tired of seeing the same people in her community, the same people - including the fathers of her children – driving by. She wanted to be free. She acknowledges that she does not know if she loves her husband. She is marrying him because he loves her and she needs this love. Being married is important to her because she will finally be like other women.

As they head for the car to leave the wedding ceremony, Roselily understands that her husband does not belong in this community in Mississippi. She realizes that she, too, will likely be in the same position of not belonging in his community when they move to Chicago.

Analysis

It is interesting that the story has been written in the third person point of view: the first person is more usual in this stream-of-consciousness writing style. Telling the story in the third person enables the author to explore the internal feelings of characters other than Roselily.

The division of the story into sections by lines of the wedding ceremony dampens the pace of the story, and the reference to Roselily feeling as if she is moving through quicksand further emphasizes the sense of slow motion. This slow tempo makes the reader aware of how time is moving for Roselily and emphasizes the importance of this moment in Roselily's life.

Roselily refers to herself as a little girl on a couple of occasions; this makes it clear that she feels as though she is not in control of her situation. Her lack of control is further explored through numerous references to restriction and confinement. When Roselily hears the phrase "to join this man and this woman," she thinks of ropes, handcuffs and the groom's religion. These ropes and chains represent the imprisonment she knows

she is entering by marrying this man. She will be confined both by the marriage and by her husband's religion. Nonetheless, she weighs this incarceration against the chance to earn respect and stop laboring. She considers it a fair trade.

Roselily does not love the man she is marrying. She longs for the life she feels he represents, and the normalcy of being married. It is significant that she says that she longs to be married like other "girls" before correcting herself to say "women." This conception of herself as a child reflects back to how powerless she feels, and illustrates her belief that she has never really lived. Her feelings of desperation, of being trapped and not having the ability to escape, are palpable.

The theme of escape – shown in the form of the people in the cars – is explored throughout this story. Roselily discovers that she may have been so eager to escape and so frustrated at being poor, that she did not consider the facts of her future life. In her fervent desire for a new life where she could be respectable and free from poverty and her past, Roselily failed to realize that her freedom came at a price that she may not be willing to pay**.**

The fact that the husband sees "white faces" in the cars and feels that they are "usurping" the wedding indicates racial tension. The author, by indicating that only the husband is angry with the white people driving by, suggests that perhaps Roselily does not experience this same level of tension with these people. It is possible that Roselily is not angry with the people driving by because she sees them as people who are going somewhere better. This urge to move on, to find things that are better, is a central theme in this story and is exactly what Roselily is seeking.

Considering that weddings are supposed to be days of celebration, Roselily's thoughts of ghosts are indicative of just how unhappy she is. The reference to ghosts not only emphasizes this discontent, but also suggests that Roselily's past will haunt her. The fact that Roselily thinks about her children, and how they are part of her reason for marrying this man, suggests that her children are part of the past that haunts her.

The theme of religion as a separating force also runs throughout the story. Religion separates the groom from the people at the wedding; it separates Roselily from her own people and the preacher; and, it separates her from her husband. Roselily's references to the "wrong God" and her lack of faith in the preacher indicate that Roselily is not able to find comfort or escape from either her religion or her husband's.

As the story concludes, the theme of imprisonment is further emphasized by Roselily's husband's hand feeling like an "iron gate." The theme of religion inserts a final wedge by setting her husband, and thus herself, farther away from the people at the wedding. The theme of Roselily's escape is proven futile as the story ends with Roselily's realization that, even in her new life in Chicago, she will still feel "wrong."

Characters

Husband

The man to whom Roselily is being married is never named. He is a Black Muslim from Chicago, who will take Roselily and her children back with him after the wedding and remake them. He has agreed to a country wedding on Roselily's front porch, but he looks down on the people of Panther Burn because of their simple ways and their subservience to whites. Roselily wonders whether he also looks down on her.

Roselily

Roselily is the protagonist of the story, and everything in the story is seen through her eyes. She has lived all her life in Panther Burn, Mississippi, the daughter of poor but hard-working parents. Roselily herself knows what it is to work hard: she is unmarried and raising three children alone on what she earns picking cotton and sewing in a factory. Marrying and moving to Chicago is her best chance to attain respectability at last, and she is willing to take that chance for the sake of her children, even though it means marrying a man she does not love. As she half-listens to her wedding ceremony, she reflects on how she has arrived at this state, and wonders how she will take to the strict confines of life as the wife in a Black Muslim home.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

An unwed mother in a small town, Roselily lives a lonely life. As she stands beside her future husband filled with doubt, there is no one in the crowd who senses what she is feeling. She feels no connection to the people she is leaving or to the man she is leaving with. She has no friends, although she has known the same women since they were girls together; as a single woman she has been a threat, especially when the other women's husbands made passes at her. She has a demanding job at a sewing plant, and is raising three children alone, so she has little time for anything else. The only person she feels "joined" to is her mother, who is dead. She does not think she loves her husband, and the fact that he loves her "makes her completely conscious of how unloved she was before."

Change and Transformation

Roselily is a woman who is seeking to change, to be transformed. In her current life, she is unwed, the mother of four children by at least three fathers. She works long hours in a sewing factory, and still lives in the same small town where her family has lived for generations. Although she had a lover from New England and is marrying a man from Chicago, she knows nothing about life beyond her small community. Her children will grow up "underneath the detrimental wheel," with the same limitations, unless she can make a change.

Although she has serious misgivings about her marriage, it does offer her the chance for a new life. His life as a Black Muslim has already worked a transformation in her husband. The old women at the wedding can sense that he was once one of them, but in some way that they cannot name, he is "still a son, not a son. Changed." Roselily knows that she will change, too. She will move to Chicago and live in a larger house on the South Side. She and her husband and children will "live and build and be respectable and respected and free." This chance to have her husband "redo her into what he truly wants" is both exciting and terrifying. When she has been transformed, will she have lost herself? For the sake of her children, she is willing to take the risk.

God and Religion

One of the central conflicts of the story is between Roselily's wavering belief in Christianity and her husband's devout faith as a Black Muslim. Roselily has been raised a Christian, and she is the bride in a Christian wedding, but she does not really believe in God. To her, the minister is more intimidating than any image of God she has ever held. Although nominally a Christian, she also has learned some of her family's folk beliefs, of which she is both "ashamed and frightened." Her husband's religion also seems more intimidating than comforting. She will be made to wear a robe and veil, to

stay home and raise more children, to sit apart in worship services. Although she knows more about his faith than the wedding guests, who "cannot understand that he is not a Christian," she has only small images and pieces of information.

Walker has expressed her own doubts about the ability of Christianity and Islam to serve African- American women. In other stories, she has examined Christianity as an imperialist weapon used against Africans. "Roselily," as she explains in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* reflects the fact that she is "intrigued by the religion of the Black Muslims, by what conversion means to black women, specifically, and what the religion itself means in terms of the black American past: our history, our 'race memories,' our absorption of Christianity, our *changing* of Christianity to fit our needs. What will the new rituals mean?" Roselily, on the day of her wedding, is about to learn the answer.

Style

Point of View

"Roselily" is told in the present tense by a limited third-person narrator. The narrator is not Roselily, but reports only what she thinks and sees. Everything is seen through her eyes, and interpreted through the filters of her own experiences. Because Roselily is not paying close attention to her own wedding but daydreaming, the images and thoughts presented by the narrator are meandering, some times sharply in focus and at other times only vague impressions. It is possible that the husband truly loves Roselily and feels tenderness for her and her children. Perhaps he is nervous about the marriage himself. But there is no attempt to reveal his thoughts, except as Roselily tries to read them through his clothing and his manner. Telling the story from this point of view puts the focus squarely on Roselily and on her feelings during the few minutes of the ceremony. Walker is not interested in giving the plot details of a wedding and what happens after it, but in giving a voice to one woman at one moment in her life.

Setting

The setting of a story includes the time and place in which it occurs, and also the spiritual and even economic background of the characters. "Roselily" takes place in the rural town of Panther Burn, Mississippi. The time is probably during the 1960s, since the child that Roselily gave to his civilrights- worker father is no older than two. The residents of Panther Burn are poor and black. Roselily's father has earned a meager living trapping animals and selling their skins to Sears, and Roselily herself has worked picking cotton, and now supports three children by operating a sewing machine in a clothing factory. All of the cars driving by on the highway have white drivers.

People who are born in this small town tend to stay, there being no reason and no opportunity to get out. Roselily has lived there all her life, along with all the girls she knew in school. Her mother and grandparents are buried there. They are all Christian, but retain some echoes of traditional beliefs in ghosts and curses as well. Roselily is clearly intelligent, but she is not well educated. Her language and that of her people is not "good enough" for her Harvard lover, and her tastes do not run to Bach and chess. More significantly, she knows nothing about the world of the North. She supposes that New England is far different from Mississippi, but does not really know. All she knows for sure about Illinois is that Abraham Lincoln lived there. The idea that she will be going to a completely new setting is what thrills and frightens her.

Narrative

The term *narrative* is generally taken to mean a telling of an event or a series of events. These events might be actions, or conversation, or other elements of plot that are related to each other by a web of cause and effect. Often, the details are arranged in

chronological order, but the order may be varied for particular effects. "Roselily" is not a narrative in the conventional sense. There is no direct action and no talk, except for the ritual speech of the minister. The time passed during the "present" of the story may be as little as five minutes, or perhaps as many as fifteen. Presumably, the wedding party and guests are speaking and moving about, but the only actions that pass before the reader's mind are those that Roselily remembers from the distant past or imagines about her future. In this non-narrative construction, "Roselily" is more like a poem than like a conventional short story.

Stream of Consciousness

The term for the non-narrative structure of the story is *stream of consciousness.* The term applies to writing that seeks to capture the way the human mind really works: not logically and sequentially, in full sentences and developed paragraphs, but in a rush of interwoven thoughts, impressions, and memories. By reading the entire story, one can piece together a sequential narrative of Roselily's life, but the details are not presented chronologically. Roselily's movements from idea to idea are triggered by the minister's words, by outside noises, by physical sensations, and by memories connecting to other memories.

Historical Context

African-American Women Writers

Walker has often commented that when she was studying English in college in the early 1960s, nearly all of the writing discussed in her classes was written by white men. Later, when classes in black literature were formed, nearly all of the writers studied were black men. No works by African- American women were being taught, and few were even in print. As a reader and a writer, Walker hungered for models that would be more appropriate to her own life. In an essay titled "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," she recounts a story about another African-American writer: "It has often been said that someone asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: Because they are the kind of books I want to read." Taking Morrison's comment one step further, Walker explains, "I write all the things *I should have been able to read."*

Readers since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Walker was writing the stories in *In Love and Trouble*, have not had such difficulty finding a variety of models. The period saw a tremendous flowering of writing by African-American women that was recognized for its literary quality and that sold well. In addition to Walker's early volumes of poetry and fiction, there appeared Nikki Giovanni's poetry collection, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968); Maya Angelou's first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970); Audre Lorde's black feminist lesbian poetry collection, *The First Cities* (1970); Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973); and Gayl Jones's novel, *Corregidora* (1975). These women wrote about women's experiences from a woman's point of view. Although they found some resistance to their writing, especially from African-American male critics, they also found a large and eager audience.

Black Muslims

Roselily's husband is a Black Muslim, an adherent to the religion called the Nation of Islam. The religion was founded in the 1930s in Detroit, Michigan, by Wallace D. Fard, who proclaimed himself "the Supreme Ruler of the Universe." At first, one of the goals of the religion was to work toward a separate African-American nation, which would come to fruition after the white race and Christianity were destroyed. Later, emphasis shifted to working toward social justice in a multicultural world. Black Muslims took their teachings both from the Islamic Holy Book, the Qur'an, and from the Christian Bible, to create a religion that only loosely resembled either mainstream religious tradition. Religious practice is founded on obedience and discipline. Black Muslims follow strict dietary rules based on Islamic belief, and maintain clearly de- fined and separate roles for men and women.

In 1934, Fard was replaced by Elijah Muhammad, who was proclaimed a "Prophet." Muhammad led the Black Muslims until 1975, gradually building the movement into a large and well-organized body of black separatists, clustered mainly in large Northern cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Nation of Islam was generally opposed to the nonviolent strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., believing that a more aggressive and confrontational approach would be more successful in gaining equal rights for African Americans. But the Nation of Islam was not merely angry and aggressive. When the boxer Muhammad Ali, a Black Muslim, was drafted in 1967 to fight in Vietnam, he refused to go because of his religious beliefs and was forced to give up his title as World Heavyweight Champion.

Critical Overview

Having already made a name for herself with her first book of poems, *Once: Poems* (1968), and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Walker found herself the center of a great deal of critical attention when *In Love and Trouble* came out in 1973. Louis Pratt and Darnell Pratt list twenty-nine reviews in their annotated bibliography, *Alice Malsenior Walker,* far more than usual for a first volume of short stories. The reviews were almost unanimously favorable, although a few reviewers found the stories uneven in quality.

One issue for writers of fiction at the end of the twentieth century is whether fiction that does not revolve around white men can be considered "universal." Often, books about white men are thought of as representing the "human condition," while books about women are thought to represent women, and books about black women are thought to represent black women. Some early reviewers praised Walker for drawing on her own experiences in the rural South to portray the particular situations of black women. Barbara Smith, in a review for *Ms.,* admires Walker's skill at exploring "with honesty the texture and terrors of Black women's lives." In a review for *The Crisis,* the magazine of the NAACP, Mercedes Wright argues that Walker's characters face their particular conflicts because they live in a racist and sexist society.

Other earlier reviews acknowledged that Walker's characters are, as the title states, black women, but felt that their stories were more widely applicable. Writing for *Bestsellers,* Oscar Bouise reports that Walker had enabled him to appreciate the experiences of these women, and praises her as a "master of style." V. S. Nyabongo praises Walker in *Books Abroad* for presenting a collection of stories which, through women's stories, reflect on themes that are significant for all people.

"Roselily" remained a much-admired but seldom- discussed story after the first rush of reviews, receiving renewed notice after Walker's winning of the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award for *The Color Purple* gave rise to a reevaluation of her earlier work. In her groundbreaking essay "Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction," Alice Hall Petry demonstrates that the situations that keep Walker's women "in love and trouble" are not of their own making. "Certainly marriage offers these women nothing, and neither does religion, be it Christianity, the Black Muslim faith, or voodoo." Mary Helen Washington agrees, in "An Essay on Alice Walker," that Roselily is "trapped and cut down by archaic conventions, by superstition, by traditions that in every way cut women off from the right to life."

After the publication of *The Color Purple*, it became something of a cliche to charge that the male characters in Walker's fiction are portrayed in too negative a light, and her women, while downtrodden, are invariably resilient. Two critics have noted, however, that Roselily displays no special pluck in her current situation. In an essay titled "Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker: A Spiritual Kinship," Alma Freeman compares Roselily with Janie Crawford, the protagonist in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and finds that, unlike Janie, Roselily accepts her entrapment. Donna Haisty Winchell agrees

that Roselily is an example of the women in *In Love and Trouble* who are not seen "fighting back successfully against preconceived, stultifying, and restrictive notions of women's roles."

Critics have also discussed the experimental qualities of the story. Hall finds the irony of alternating Roselily's thoughts with the words of the wedding ceremony "heavy-handed," but concludes "the device does work in this story." Barbara Christian, in "The Contrary Women of Alice Walker," notes the narrator's use of the third person pronoun she to represent Roselily's own thoughts, and suggests, "even in Roselily's mind, the being who wonders about, questions this day of triumph, is both herself, and yet not herself."

In 1994, "Roselily" suddenly attracted national attention again, when the California Department of Education ordered the story removed from a statewide reading test. The call for removal came from a group called the Traditional Values Coalition, which labeled the story antireligious. They worried that Roselily's admission that she does not believe in God, the fact of her husband's belief in Islam, and the implied questioning of marriage itself would raise improper questions for the tenth graders taking the test. Supporters of the story's inclusion spoke of the need for state tests and curricula to include challenging, thought-provoking material that deals with real-world issues. Ironically, during the same year as the "Roselily" controversy, Walker was honored by California's governor as a "state treasure" for her contributions to literature.

Walker has collected the text of "Roselily" and two other censored pieces of her own writing, letters to the editor in support of and opposed to "Roselily," and transcripts of the State Board of Education hearings on the matter into a book called *Banned*. As is the case with most cases of book removal, the removal of the story from the California test served to create renewed interest in the story, and to bring it to the attention of a new generation of readers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Bily has a master's degree in English literature and has written for a variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the poetic qualities of Walker's story.

Over three decades of continuous productivity and acclaim, Alice Walker has earned a place as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century. She has published six novels, two collections of short stories, two collections of essays, five volumes of poetry, and several books for children. Ten million copies of her books have been sold around the world. She was the first African- American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, for her novel *The Color Purple,* and several of her other books have been as well-regarded by critics and scholars as by the buying and reading public.

Walker has come so far from the young writer struggling to find her voice, it is easy to forget that she was a poet before she was a fiction writer, and that she inverted the normal order of things by publishing a novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* before issuing her first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women.* Early in her career, Walker turned to poetry at her lowest moments. The poems in her first collection, *Once: Poems*, for example, were written in one desperate week just after an abortion. In an interview with John O'Brien, collected in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* she explains, "all of my poems . . . are written when I have successfully pulled myself out of a completely numbing despair, and stand again in sunlight. Writing poems is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before." But the lines between genres have always been a bit blurred for her. Essays are likely to contain bits of verse, some of the poems read like prose, and some stories, like "Roselily," read like poems. It could be believed that "Roselily" *is*, in fact, a poem, or can profitably be read as one.

Walker herself has hinted at the appropriateness of this type of reading. In the John O'Brien interview she discusses her attempts to "try to figure out what I am doing in my writing, where it is headed, and so on," and concludes, "I almost never can come up with anything." But if she cannot articulate a plan for work in progress, she knows which finished pieces please her: "I like those of my short stories that show the plastic, shaping, almost painting quality of words. In 'Roselily' and 'The Child Who Favors Daughter' the prose is poetry, or prose and poetry run together to add a new dimension to the language." It is exactly the ways that "prose and poetry run together" in the story that will be considered.

Of course, anything can be read as a poem, and a writer can call a collection of words anything she wishes. The idea behind the exercise of looking for "found poems" is that a poem is a poem if the reader thinks it is, even if someone else thinks it's a phone book. Walker has planted small poetic treasures through "Roselily," to reward those who wish to find a poem in it. In doing so, she has created a piece of writing that resembles the swirl of impressions and sensations of Roselily's mind.

The structure of the story is nonlinear, a collection of short paragraphs or stanzas that float as freely as Roselily's consciousness. They are not chronological, nor are they arranged in a sequence shaped by cause and effect. Some of the passages respond directly to the bits of wedding ceremony that come before them, but many do not. The paragraphs accumulate in the reader's mind like pieces of a collage or a stained-glass window. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but the parts themselves could be gently shifted, rearranged.

Of all of Walker's writings, "Roselily" most resembles, in the way it is put together, a poem called "Mornings / Of An Impossible Love," from *Once: Poems*. "Mornings" is composed of five brief passages written in paragraph form. It presents five musings by a woman whose lover is getting ready to leave her. Like "Roselily," it gains its poetic power by accumulation, by layering, by repetition. It does not attempt to tell a story so much as to put on the page the thoughts and impressions in a woman's mind.

To direct readers to focus on sensation or atmosphere rather than on plot or action, poetry exploits sound. Poetry, more than prose, is concerned with "what it is like" rather than "what happened next," and readers must be made to slow down, to linger over lines and experiences. In Roselily's short, stanza-like passages of thought, Walker uses some of the sound tools of the poet, including alliteration, repetition, and rhythm, to heighten the emphasis on particular lines and phrases. Most of this heightening is subconscious, but readers, especially experienced readers, pick up clues from the sounds of words in addition to their meanings.

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in words that come right after each other or closely together. For example, the first line of the story after "Dearly Beloved" begins: "She dreams; dragging herself." The repetition of *dr* is hard to pronounce, making something of a tongue twister. The small difficulty in pronouncing "dreams; dragging" makes the reader slow down, linger over the words, and this gives them added emphasis. In this briefly extended moment, the reader is forced to confront what is surely a surprise at the beginning of the story: After a lovely flower name, and the beginning of a wedding ceremony, and the sweet thought "she dreams," there is the word *dragging*. The reader thus learns right away that this story will have surprises, and that one must pay attention to the individual words. Right away, the reader is encouraged to make a small shift and begins to read the story like a poem.

Other lines elevate their emotional content by the inclusion of alliteration. Thinking of the respectability she will soon have, Roselily imagines her new position: "What a vision, a view, from up so high." Here the v sound echoes, but it does not slow the line down. The repetition of synonyms emphasizes the soaring feeling, as all the consonants fit smoothly together into one long line.

Near the end of the ceremony, Roselily reflects, in short, choppy lines, on what is ahead for her. "Proposal. Promises. A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free!" Here again, the consonant combinations are hard to pronounce smoothly, and the punctuation between words slows down the reading even further. "Proposal. Promises." Roselily is holding on to these words, remembering why she is about to make this big

change. The marriage was not her idea; she is beyond thinking her way out of her situation. But her husband has suggested this marriage, and now it is happening. Like a chant, she repeats and remembers. "Proposal. Promises." And what will she gain? She will become "respectable, reclaimed, renewed." This, too, sounds like words she has repeated to herself many times, shaping them through trial and error to an alliterative and rhythmic chant. She is not thinking in full sentences or big ideas any more, but forcing herself to focus on the essential: "Respectable, reclaimed, renewed."

In addition to using repetition of consonant sounds for emphasis, Walker also repeats whole words and phrases, creating a rhythm that is more poetry than prose. This happens most often in the second half of the story, after the minister asks whether anyone "knows a reason why." For example, the words "wonders" and "thinks" are repeated far more frequently than would be necessary for exposition. At one point, "She wonders how to make new roots. It is beyond her. She wonders what one does with memories." A bit later, "She thinks of her mother, who is dead. Dead, but still her mother." And a bit later, "She wonders what it will be like. Not to have to go to a job. Not to work in a sewing plant. Not to worry about learning to sew straight seams." The rhythmic qualities of the repeated lines keep repetitions like this from sounding silly or dull. Interestingly, the frequency of this kind of repetition increases as the story goes along, as though Roselily's thinking becomes less rational and more impressionistic as she gets closer to being a wife.

There are lines in the story that read like puzzles, or like tangled balls of line that must be untangled to be examined. Like the alliterative lines, these lines force the reader to stop and linger, to sort out the meaning. The first "stanza" includes such a line: "The man who stands beside her is against this standing on the front porch of her house." At the halfway point, when the minister begins his second sentence, there is this: "*If there's anybody here that knows a reason why* / But of course they know no reason why beyond what they daily have come to know." Teachers of expository writing and even fiction writing encourage their students to avoid lines like this, under the assumption that readers of prose do not expect to be challenged at the sentence level. Ideas may be complex, but sentences should be clear. Poetry revels in such word games, in demonstrating on the page the non-linear qualities of thought and emotion.

Others have discussed the story's use of repeated images. As Donna Haisty Winchell demonstrates in *Alice Walker,* Roselily's "mother's white robe and veil" is transformed into the robe and veil that protect and segregate Muslim women. Roselily never explicitly makes the connection, but the repetition of the image and the language (the image of the robe and veil occurs four times in this very brief story) connect and confuse the two meanings in the reader's mind. In "An Essay on Alice Walker," Mary Helen Washington identifies several "fleeting images" of entrapment that "inadvertently break through" Roselily's mind: "quicksand, flowers choked to death, cotton being weighed, ropes, chains, handcuffs, cemeteries, a cornered rat." To use imagery so insistently in such a small space seems again to be more poetry than prose.

This is not to say that qualities such as sound, rhythm, word play, and repeated imagery are not to be found in prose. Nothing is gained by debating whether "Roselily" and

"Mornings" are short stories or poems. Literature is more than message; it is also the medium, the way a message is conveyed. Is "Roselily" a short story or a poem, perhaps the type of lyric poem called a dramatic monologue? It is both, and draws power from each tradition. But if a reader is willing to bring to this story some of the serious playfulness that poetry draws out, she will be twice blessed.

Source: Cynthia Bily, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of "personal spirits" in Walker's story.

The short story "Roselily," by Alice Walker, is written as the internal monologue of a woman, Roselily, while she stands at the altar taking her wedding vows. Through this internal monologue, Roselily expresses a strong current of ambivalence about the marriage that is taking place. Furthermore, as she hears each phrase of the wedding vows, spoken by the preacher, Roselily interprets it in her own way, as an expression of her true feelings about the impending marriage.

A closer look at one of the opening epigraphs to *Women in Love and Trouble,* the short story collection in which "Roselily" appears, helps to illuminate the nature of Roselily's ambivalence. This passage, from *The Concubine,* by Elechi Amadi, describes a young girl whose parents engaged her to marry when she was only eight days old. It is explained that the girl's irrational behavior and frequent crying is attributable to her *agwu* her "personal spirit": "Of course the influence of *agwu* could not be nullified overnight. In fact it would never be completely eliminated. Everyone was mildly influenced now and then by his personal spirit." Thus, the girl's "personal spirit," which "could never be completely eliminated" represents the assertion of her own individual will against the restrictions placed on her by her role in society. Having been promised by her parents to marry without her choice or consent, the girl's internal impulse toward rebellion can only be expressed through her "personal spirit." The implication is that, even under the most oppressive conditions, the individual will, or "personal spirit" of any person will find a way to assert itself.

The second epigraph to this story collection complements the first. An excerpt from *Letters to a Young Poet,* by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, this passage asserts that it is human nature to "be oneself," no matter what difficulties one encounters to do so, "at all costs," and "against all opposition": "everything in Nature grows and defends itself in its own way and is characteristically and spontaneously itself, seeks at all costs to be so and against all opposition."

Together, these two passages illuminate the meaning of Roselily's inner monologue during her wedding ceremony. As the snippets of the traditional Christian wedding sermon intrude upon her thoughts, Roselily's inner monologue represents the assertion of her "personal spirit," despite the restrictions placed upon her by her impending marriage. Although, unlike the girl in the first epigraph, Roselily has freely chosen this marriage, her position as a poor, Southern, black woman, a single mother of four children (one of them living with his father), has severely limited the options from which she has had to choose. And, although she outwardly conforms to the expectations of her community and her husband-to-be, Roselily's internal monologue expresses the impulse to be herself, if only in her mind, even "against all odds." With each phrase of

the sermon, Roselily's internal monologue twists the words into an expression of her own "personal spirit"—a spirit at odds with the traditionally intended meaning of the wedding vows.

Even as the wedding ceremony begins, "Dearly Beloved," Roselily's private thoughts break free from the restrictions being imposed upon her by this marriage: "She dreams. . . ." Her thoughts struggle to take her far away from where she stands at the altar, "dragging herself across the world." Although she is about to marry a man whom she will be expected to obey, her thoughts take her to a place where she specifically does something he disapproves of: "The man who stands beside her is against this standing on the front porch of her house. . . ."

As the sermon continues, Roselily's inner monologue continues to express the assertion of her "personal spirit" against the restrictions of her subordinate position in society, as represented by her impending marriage. As the preacher says, "We are gathered here . . ." Roselily mentally finishes his sentence, "like cotton to be weighed." Roselily sees her own role in the wedding as that of an item in a monetary exchange; she feels like a bale of cotton, being weighed and evaluated for the purposes of someone else's profit. This thought expresses Roselily's sense of her role in the wedding and marriage as little more than a material possession of the man she is marrying in an exchange that will ultimately benefit only him.

Roselily's rebellious thoughts during the wedding ceremony go so far as to enter the realms of murder and blasphemy. She expresses a wish that she could be free of her three children: "She dreams she does not already have three children." But her inner desire for freedom from her societal role in the family goes even farther, to the extent that she envisions killing her children. The flowers in her hand symbolize her children, who are presumably three, four, and five years of age, as she thinks "a squeeze around the flowers in her hands chokes off three and four and five years of breath." But Roselily is aware of herself outwardly conforming to societal expectations while inwardly rebelling against them. After imagining killing her own children, Roselily makes an outward gesture of faith to the preacher, as she "forces humility into her eyes, as if she believes he is, in fact, a man of God." Yet, while conforming to the preacher's expectations through this outward gesture, Roselily's true beliefs run counter to those represented by the preacher and traditional religion. Roselily imagines her own version of God, different from that of the preacher: "She can imagine God, a small black boy, timidly pulling the preacher's coattail."

Roselily envisions her marriage to this man as a form of bondage, or slavery. She associates the phrase "to join this man and woman," as indicating that she will be tied, chained, or handcuffed to him as if against her will: "she thinks of ropes, chains, handcuffs. . . ." Yet, she has chosen the marriage because she imagines it will be a ticket to freedom from economic oppression for herself and her children: "Respect, a chance to build. Her children at last from underneath the detrimental wheel. A chance to be on top. What a relief, she thinks. What a vision, a view, from up so high." Roselily is thus of two minds about the marriage. But her reasons for going into it are born of

economic hardship and limited options for herself and her children. Her "personal spirit," however, continues to rebel against the marriage.

Despite Roselily's positive expectations regarding her new life with her new husband in the northern city of Chicago, she also associates the city with the oppression of her "personal spirit." In imagining the city, "she thinks of the air, the smoke, the cinders. Imagines cinders big as hailstones; heavy, weighing on the people. Wonders how this pressure finds its way into the veins, roping the springs of laughter." Roselily thus associates the city with oppressiveness, as expressed through the image of the cinders, "weighing on the people." She imagines the effect of city life almost as that of a disease, which "finds its way into the veins," again associating it with images of bondage that will effectively crush her spirit, "roping the springs of laughter."

Upon hearing the preacher's words, "If there's anybody here that knows a reason why," Roselily feels that she herself doesn't know the "reason why" she has chosen to marry this man. The only reason she can think of is that he represents a life different from, hopefully better than, the impoverished life she and her children have known up to this point: "But of course there is no reason why beyond what they daily have come to know." The impending marriage, which is meant to unite a man and woman into a family, feels for Roselily like the beginning of a separation from her man and her children. Already she "feels shut away from him because of the stiff severity of his plain black suit." And, imagining their new life, "it is as if her children are already gone from her." Roselily imagines that her new life with this man will not make room for her own "personal spirit," restricting even her right to her own memories, for "she wonders what one does with memories in a brandnew life. This had seemed easy, until she thought of it." The "brand-new life" represents for Roselily a sacrifice of her past, her "memories," and thus of some part of who she is.

The traditional wedding statement, "If anyone here knows a reason why these two should not be joined together, let him speak or forever hold his peace," becomes fragmented in Roselily's mind, taking on very different, if not contrary, meanings to its original intent. The phrase, "these two should not be joined," taken out of the context of the complete sentence, expresses Roselily's inner feeling that she and this man should *not* be joined. Roselily feels that her marriage to this man is "absurd," meaningless, and imagines that her sisters, too, can see this: "They giggle, she feels, at the absurdity of the wedding." Although Roselily has chosen to marry this man for the sake of starting a "new life," she now begins to doubt her desire for "something new." She thinks that it is her sisters who are "ready for something new," and that it would be more appropriate for one of them to marry him. Again, Roselily associates the word "joined" with bondage and slavery; she feels "yoked." While this marriage represents a "new" life, Roselily begins to feel the urge to be "joined" to her past: "An arm seems to reach out from behind her and snatch her backward." Roselily associates the word "joined," not with her new husband, but with her dead relatives. She feels "joined" to her mother, although she is dead. She also associates the word "joined" with her ancestors, her grandparents, the "ghosts" of the past, rather than the newness of her future: "She thinks of cemeteries and the long sleep of grandparents mingling in the dirt. She believes that she believes in ghosts." Roselily feels rooted, or "joined," through her

ancestors, her family, and her personal past, to the "soil" upon which she has always lived. The "soil" represents her rural Southern roots, as opposed to the "cinders" of the northern city to which she is moving. Roselily thinks of this "soil" as having something to offer her, for she believes "in the soil giving back what it takes." All of these thoughts confirm Roselily's feeling that she and this man "should not be joined."

As the preacher says, "together," Roselily's internal monologue finishes the sentence, "together . . . in the city." Yet Roselily's strong connection to the past, to her "memories" conflict with the promise of a "new" life and "new" self associated with the city. Roselily's husband-to-be "sees her in a new way," but she is not sure she is capable of shedding her connection to the past to become "new enough." While the wedding represents the "new," Roselily maintains a stronger emotional tie to the past, to "memories." She even associates her wedding dress with a restriction on her personal freedom, as "even now her body itches to be free of satin and voile, organdy and lily of the valley." And, while the "new" represents loss of freedom, the past represents freedom from such restrictions: "Memories crash against her. Memories of being bare to the sun." Roselily's memories of freedom are clearly in violent conflict with the new restricted life represented by the wedding dress. The memories "crash against her," with the force of violent impact.

As Roselily hears the preacher's words, "let him speak," she thinks that maybe she should have let her husband-to-be "speak" to her more about what their life together would be like: "She wishes she had asked him to explain more of what he meant." Yet, Roselily had been eager to marry him because he represented a new life and promise of "freedom." She was "impatient to see the South Side, where they would live and build and be respectable and respected and free. Her husband would free her. . . . A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free!" However, as she stands at the altar, Rosemary's current thoughts about the marriage undercut her original dreams of freedom.

As the wedding draws to a close, Roselily's "personal spirit" begins to assert itself all the more ardently against the marriage and the restrictions it represents. She imagines herself, her "personal spirit," in the marriage as a rat trapped in a cage: "Something strains upward behind her eyes. She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes." At this point, Roselily's "personal spirit" rebels against the marriage through her desire "to live for once." Because he has sanctified the marriage, Roselily begins to see the preacher himself as a force standing in the way of her "freedom," her need to assert her "personal spirit": "The preacher is odious to her. She wants to strike him out of the way, out of her light, with the back of her hand. It seems to her he has always been standing in front of her, barring her way."

With the closing words, "his peace," the wedding ceremony is completed. In Roselily's mind, the marriage will not represent *her* peace, but only "his" peace—that of her husband. She thinks of being "joined" to this man as being imprisoned, feeling that "her husband's hand is like the clasp of an iron gate." And, while she is imprisoned by the marriage, her husband remains "free" within the marriage, as he holds out a "free hand"

to the people crowding around him after the ceremony. And, while she before saw the preacher as the one "standing in front of her, barring her way," it is now her husband who "is standing in front of her."

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Roselily's impending entrapment through marriage, and its relationship to the epigraphs that open the collection.

Two epigraphs drawing from vastly different cultures and time periods introduce Alice Walker's 1967 collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*. These epigraphs provide a subtle commentary on the stories to come, particularly "Roselily," the story that opens the volume, which traces the dreamlike state of a poor southern African-American woman on the verge of making her marriage vows to a Black Muslim who will take her and her children to a new life in Chicago.

The first epigraph is excerpted from *The Concubine,* a novel published in 1966 by noted Nigerian author Elechi Amadi. Amadi writes of the young Ahurole, who has over the past year or so erupted into "unprovoked sobbing" from time to time.

But though intelligent, Ahurole could sometimes take alarmingly irrational lines of argument. . . . From all this her parents easily guessed that she was being unduly influenced by agwu, her personal spirit. . . . [T]he influence of the agwu could not be nullified overnight. In fact it would never be completely eliminated. Everyone was mildly influenced now and then by his personal spirit. A few like Ahurole were particularly unlucky in having very troublesome spirits.

Then, at the end of the selection, Amadi reveals the reason for the child's anxiety: "Ahurole was engaged to Ekwueme when she was eight years old."

The second selection comes from an early twentieth-century collection of the German poet Ranier Maria Rilke.

People have (with the help of conventions) oriented all their solutions toward the easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must hold to what is difficult; everything in Nature grows and defends itself in its own way and is characteristically and spontaneously itself, seeks at all costs to be so and against all opposition.

In an article published in *The Black Scholar,* Barbara Christian refers directly to both of these epigraphs. She raises the crucial question the story poses in her introduction to "Roselily."

The form of her [Roselily's] story, itself a marriage ceremony, is a replica of the convention, the easy solution to which she has been oriented. As a poor black woman with four illegitimate children, she is, it seems, beyond redemption. Thus, her wedding day, attended as it is by satin voile, and lily of the valley, is from any number of viewpoints a day of triumph. But she, how does she see it?

Throughout the ceremony, Roselily's subconscious mind constantly questions her "triumph." As Christian points out, Walker uses only the pronoun "she" throughout the ceremony, never "I"; it is "as if Roselily is being seen from an external point of view. . . . It is as if even in Roselily's mind, the being who wonders about, questions this day of triumph, is both herself, and yet not herself." Though Roselily successfully distances herself from her own realization of the truth, the story clearly shows her double awareness that she has made the easy choice and that she is troubled by it.

Marriage will offer for Roselily a life of relative ease, for her children greater opportunities, and for the family, respectability for the first time. Up until this moment, Roselily's life has consisted of "doing everything for three children, alone" (the fourth she gave to his father in the North because he "had some money"). She supported them through her work in a sewing factory, where she constantly worried about "learning to sew straight seams in workingmen's overalls, jeans, and dress pants." She has "prayed for" a chance to rest, but her thoughts as the preacher utters the words *"to join this man and this woman"* show that much of her inclination to marry comes because of desire to better her children's lives. She sees the marriage as a union between her and her children and the man. In Chicago, the children will have "a chance to build . . . at last [be out] from underneath the detrimental wheel. A chance to be on top." At the end of the ceremony, the children look at their stern stepfather with distaste and awe, because he is different from everyone they have known, but also with hope for the future they know he can bring them to.

The marriage also offers Roselily respectability for the first time in her life. The girls she has grown up with are married to men who are "hanging around her, already old, seedy." In Panther Burn the fathers of her children drive by, "waving, not waving" as the mood hits them. They are only "reminders of times she would just as soon forget." She has the self-awareness that she "does not even know if she loves" her new husband, but she is certain that she "loves his sobriety. . . . She loves his pride. She loves his understanding of her *condition."*

Though Roselily tries to convince herself that she is pleased at "finally being married, like other girls," her *agwu* will not be so accepting. Like Ahurole, who is unwittingly and unhappily engaged, Roselily's impending fate causes her deepseated anxiety. As Christian notes, Roselily's *agwu,* which is "troubled by change," expresses its feeling "only in her dreaming." Still this spirit makes itself known—both to the reader, and more importantly, to Roselily, who already understands that her marriage will not provide freedom but entrapment. As the story opens and the preacher welcomes the guests to the ceremony, Roselily dreams she is a child standing with "knee raised waist high through a bowl of quicksand soup." This is only the first of many images of entrapment presented in the story. Roselily's *agwu* continues to bring her impending fate to her through images of physical restraints. She thinks of her father's occupation, a trapper who sold the skins of wild animals to Sears. When the preacher utters the words *"to join this man and this woman"* Roselily's mind immediately jumps to "ropes, chains, handcuffs." Her very clothes repre sent her bondage, and "her body itches to be free of satin and voile, organdy and lily of the valley." She knows she is "[y]oked" to a future

that does not appeal to her. She will be forever held in "her husband's hand [which] is like the clasp of an iron gate."

Her husband's religious beliefs provide the main basis for her entrapment. As Christian explains the precepts of the Black Muslims, "to the man she is marrying, God is Allah, the devil is the white man, and work is building a black nation." He looks down on Roselily, her family, and her community members for following the "teachings from the wrong God"□the white man's Christian God. Instead, Roselily will be forced to embrace Islam, a religion that traditionally segregates women. During worship, women are "required to sit apart with covered head." The *purdah*, which religious law requires all Islamic women to wear in public, becomes symbolically the marriage veil that she now wears. In her book-length study *Alice Walker* Donna Haisty Winchell explains, "The marriage veil has been transformed into the purdah, the outward sign that in her womanhood she is inferior and that marriage is a binding, not a freeing." Roselily also recognizes that she is submitting her children to her husband's ideology. She thinks of her new "lifetime of black and white. Of veils. Covered head. It is as if her children are already gone from her." Her husband will place them "exalted on a pedestal" as new members of the black nation. This stalk, she thinks, "has no roots," because her children will lose all contact with their background and where and who they come from.

To her husband, this is preferred. He looks down upon Roselily's people for their rural southern background. "She knows he blames Mississippi for the respectful way the men turn their heads up in the yard, the women standing waiting and knowledgeable." He does not understand the "country black folks." Instead, he will take her to Chicago, which becomes, for Roselily, yet another symbol of entrapment. In Chicago, she will see for the first time a cinder, "which they never had in Panther Bluff." She sees her neighbors as "clean," but Chicago as filled with "black specks falling, clinging, from the sky," which itself will oppress her. "She thinks of the air, the smoke, the cinders. Imagines cinders big as hailstones; heavy, weighing on the people." These ashes□symbols of the spent city□become ropes that will choke off "the springs of laughter."

Instead of looking ahead to the future, throughout the entire ceremony, Roselily's *agwu* draws her to her past. "She thinks of her mother, who is dead. . . . She thinks of cemeteries and the long sleep of grandparents mingling in the dirt. She believes that she believes in ghosts." The dead relatives become a part of her agwu as well. They provide the "arm [that] seems to reach out from behind her and snatch her backward." She cannot think of her and her husband's life "*together*" but rather of her own memories, which "crash against her." She has "[m]emories of being bare to the sun" because she knows that soon she will spend her life covered in the robes and veils of religion. She will be forced to hide her body and its sexuality, except for in its procreative function. For she knows "[t]hey will make babies. . . . They will be inevitable. . . . Babies. She is not comforted."

Where, she wonders, does a person put her memories in a "brand-new life"? She particularly recalls the father of her fourth child who was "a good man but weak." Its placement in the story□ coming as the preacher speaks the words "*in holy*

matrimony"□implies that he was the man Roselily wanted to marry and a contrast to the man she is now marrying. For the northerner, classical music and chess are more important than the basic, primal draw of religion. He came to Mississippi during Freedom Summer of 1964 "to try to right the country's wrongs" by registering rural African- American voters, while Roselily's husband seemed to come to the South□a region for which he has no fondness□simply to find who he could "redo . . . into what he truly wants." The husband will attempt to build a separate African-American society, while the northerner tried to integrate Roselily and her people into white society.

By the end of the story, before the final moment when she must speak those irrevocable words that accept the marriage, Roselily has become the rat that is "trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes." Significantly, she attempts to distance herself from this image: she only feels *something* behind her eyes—she does not see herself as the rat. She has the realization that she "wants to live for once. But doesn't quite know what that means." She wonders if she has ever really loved, "[i]f she ever will." The immediate rage she then feels toward the preacher, wanting to "strike him out of the way," feeling that he has always been "barring her way," shows her subconscious knowledge that she never will. It also shows her impotent urge to strike against her fate.

Though Roselily only acknowledges this truth through a dreamlike state, she clearly understands, as Winchell says, "the price she is about to pay for financial security and a future for her children." Winchell, however believes that the "search for psychological wholeness is at the heart of 'Roselily'." Realistically, the title character has little ability to achieve this. Triply disenfranchised— being poor, African-American, and female—life presents Roselily with few appealing options. Thus "Roselily" demonstrates the themes raised by Walker's choice of epigraphs. Instead of holding on to what is difficult, Roselily makes the convenient choice in her marriage, but is vastly disturbed by her actions. After she is irrevocably bound to her husband through marriage, the "worried" Roselily "feels ignorant, *wrong*, backward."

As Christian points out, however, Roselily's "dreaming is as separate from her external behavior as this Mississippi country church is from her future home. . . . But at least she can, in her imagination, know her confinement to be troublesome and recognize in a part of herself that this change is not the attainment of *her* fulfillment." As such, "Roselily" is an apt story to open this collection, significantly subtitled, "Stories of Black Women," for it raises issues that haunt the remaining stories—and the lives of African-American women.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, Fowler presents an overview of the story "Roselily."

Alice Walker is an exceptionally good writer. More than that, she has the artist's insight into the quiet dramas enacted in the inner lives of those who are anonymous and ineffable: most of us. All of which adds up to a young writer of great promise and great potential.

The promise—and the potential—are manifest in Ms. Walker's first volume of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*.The stories take in a wide spectrum of the black woman's experience in America. We are afforded glimpses of the young rural Southern woman without a husband ("Roselily,", "Strong Horse Tea"), the bored, upper class educated housewife who wanders into a love affair with a stranger ("Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?"), the deeply religious old woman who "stood with eyes uplifted in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes" ("The Welcome Table"), the black campus co-ed strangely relating to the strange white professor of French ("We Drink the Wine in France"), the conjuring tradition ("The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff").

I have the impression that the author has firsthand knowledge of many of the different life-styles she portrays in these stories. But love is not at issue in all of them. Rather, the authentic Heart of a Woman at the core of most of them shines through to pierce the surface of our caring. Yet, it is always the poignant, sad and unfulfilled heart, and primarily as it manifests itself in the rural South, which is revealed to us. The one story not set in blackamerica ("The Diary of an African Nun") does show the same lonely biding visible in most of the other women portrayed, but would probably have been better situated in a subsequent volume. And Ms. Walker's talent for affecting our sensitivities is often badly served by the tinge of cynicism she projects into many of her dénouements. All of which goes to say that *In Love and Trouble* is a book of great sensitivity, but a sensitivity not yet completely, fully realized.

Yet, these stories do succeed for the most part in creating a mood on which the reader is transposed to a state of being which, for want of more precise labels, we may call the esthetic experience. Thus, they hover in the vague no-man's-land where poetry pervades the atmosphere and obliges the world of reason to yield before the spiritual realities of the soul's yearning after more than it has. So it is that almost all of these stories focus on the most intimate reaches of the inner lives of the characters. But the purity of the esthetic experience is often marred by obvious contrivances, as in the story which opens the collection ("Roselily" —an unfortunate choice for first place, perhaps). Roselily stands beside the vaguely outlined figure of the man who will take her from her rural southern past and roots into the big city with her illegitimate children, and snatches of her conflicting thought alternate with the minister's recitation of the marriage ceremony. The device soon becomes tedious, and the experiencer of the story (the reader) soon becomes in spite of himself the critical observer of the writer's craft.

Source: Carolyn Fowler, "Solid at the Core," in *Freedomways,* Vol. 14, No. 1, 1974, pp. 59-60.

Topics for Further Study

"Roselily" was removed from a statewide reading test in California because many people believed the story to be antireligious. What message, if any, do you think the story presents about religion? Write a letter to a newspaper editor or school administrator explaining why you think "Roselily" should or should not be taught in your local high school.

Investigate the beliefs of the Nation of Islam, especially those regarding the proper roles for men and women. Does Roselily seem to have an accurate idea of what her new life will be like?

Women in Arabic Islam countries often wear a veil, or *purdah.* Learn what you can about this custom, and find some accounts by women who wear the veil. Why do many Muslim women see the *purdah* as freeing, rather than confining?

Roselily supports herself and three children on her wages as a sewing machine operator in a factory. Find out how much she might earn at this job, and calculate her expenses for food, shelter, and daycare. Do the math. How much of a factor in her decision to marry is her economic situation?

Look at some accounts of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. How many educated white men and women from the North came, like Roselily's married lover, to help with the movement? What kinds of work did they do?

Compare and Contrast

1970: Alice Walker first hears of the writer Zora Neale Hurston, a long-forgotten African-American writer of the Harlem Renaissance. She comes to admire Hurston's gift for giving voice to poor black women, and determines to read all her work.

Today: Because of Walker's efforts, Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway, and others, all of Hurston's work is in print, and widely anthologized and taught.

1973: The United States Supreme Court declares that forbidding abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy is unconstitutional. Prior to this, abortions are illegal and often unsafe "backalley" operations. Walker herself has undergone such an operation, but for most women the procedure is unavailable.

Today: Abortions are safe and widely available for American women who wish or need to limit the size of their families. Contraception is also inexpensive and easy to obtain.

1967: Walker's husband, the attorney Melvyn Leventhal, is one of many educated whites from the North who have come to Mississippi to work in the Civil Rights Movement. Walker publishes an essay entitled "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?"

Today: Laws protecting the power of wealthy whites have been erased, but institutional racism is still widespread. While many individual African Americans have made economic strides, there are still large pockets of poverty in black inner cities. No movement on the scale of the Civil Rights Movement has arisen to confront remaining issues of race and class.

1967: When Walker and her white husband move to Jackson, Mississippi, it is illegal for an interracial couple to share a home, even if they are married.

Today: The population of Mississippi is approximately two-thirds white and one-third black. Segregation laws do not exist, and the races have closer, yet still uneasy, relationships.

What Do I Read Next?

Walker's first short-story collection, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), includes "Roselily" and other stories of vulnerable women looking for dignity and love.

The Color Purple (1982) is Walker's novel about Celie, a woman who finds inner strength after a life of abuse and abandonment. It won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award.

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1983) is Walker's collection of "womanist prose," or essays, about women and art.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was one of the first novels to use the voice of a poor Southern African-American woman. It is the story of Janie Crawford, who refuses to be limited by bitterness and pain.

Cane (1923) is by Jean Toomer, a major writer of the Harlem Renaissance. The first section of the book contains several stories of Southern black women in prose and verse.

The Black Muslims (1996) is an objective history of the black nationalist organization to which Roselily's husband belongs.

Further Study

Petry, Alice Hall, "Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction," in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp. 193-210.

This is the first serious critical appraisal of Walker's short stories. Petry is harshly critical of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down,* because it does not live up to the power and insight of *In Love and Trouble.*

Pratt, Louis H. and Darnell D. Pratt, *Alice Malsenior Walker: An Annotated Bibliography: 1968-1986,* Meckler, 1988.

For the years mentioned in the title, this is a thorough annotated bibliography of works by Walker, and of critical articles, biographical articles, reviews and essays about Walker and her work. As the authors explain, the helpful annotations are descriptive, rather than evaluative.

Walker, Alice, *Banned,* Aunt Lute Books, 1996.

This is an analysis of some of the controversies surrounding Walker's fiction. The book also reprints the short stories "Roselily" and "Am I Blue?" and the first chapter of *The Color Purple,* all of which have been criticized or restricted.

Washington, Mary Helen, "An Essay on Alice Walker," in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, Amistad, 1993, pp. 37-49.

This essay examines Walker's "preoccupation" with writing about black women. After a brief history of the situations of black women in the United States since the eighteenth century, Washington demonstrates how Walker's fiction and poetry trace a history of psychological development from slavery to enlightenment.

Winchell, Donna Haisty, *Alice Walker,* Twayne, 1992.

This overview examines Walker's life, and analyzes all of her published work through *The Temple of My Familiar.* Winchell examines survival and the search for wholeness as Walker's central theme, and demonstrates the theme's handling in "Roselily."

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□□□, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 7, 13.

Winchell, Donna Haisty, *Alice Walker,* Twayne, 1992, p. 31.

Wright, Mercedes A., "Black Woman's Lament," in *The Crisis,* Vol. 81, No. 1, January, 1974, p. 31.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535