

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff Study Guide

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff by Alice Walker

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The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff Summary

The narrator of this story is an unnamed apprentice to Tante Rosie, from whom she is learning the trade of rootworking. Rootworking is a type of black magic mixed with elements of spirituality and gods. Potions, curses, healings, and prayers are practices of rootworking. The apprentice tells the story of Hannah Kemhuff, an older woman, who has come to Tante Rosie seeking revenge on someone from her past who killed her spirit.

Hannah explains that during the Depression, she was married and had four children by the age of 19. Her husband was not faithful; he continually cheated on her. On account of the Depression, Hannah and her family run out of food and begin to starve. Hannah's husband pleads with her to try to get food stamps from the government. To be eligible for the food stamps, they had to prove that they were starving. Hannah is a prideful black woman whose father is a successful peanut grower. Hannah does not want handouts of any kind, but when they have no more food and she sees her children starving, she finally gives in and asks for the food stamps.

Hannah's sister, Carrie Mae, worked for some white people who would give Carrie Mae their old used clothes. Carrie Mae sends the clothes to Hannah for her and her family to use. Before attempting to get food stamps, Hannah dresses herself and her family up in these nice clothes, since it is cold outside and the clothes are of good quality and are nice and warm. Despite the fact that they are asking for charity, Hannah and her husband look as dignified and prideful as they can when they arrive at their destination.

When they arrive, Hannah notices that everyone else is purposely dressed in rags, even people whom she knows to have better clothes at home. Her friends tell her that she's crazy to be dressed in nice hand-me-downs. Hannah begins to feel nervous and afraid about how she and her family are dressed compared to everybody else. Hannah can do nothing about the situation as she has her hands full standing in line with four crying children while her husband is walking around looking at other women.

Hannah knows that her cheating husband will leave her if she is made to look like a fool. While waiting, she sees her husband talking to his mistress, who is also dressed in rags and has made herself look dirty. Hannah knows that his mistress, who is a prostitute, has plenty of money, as her "business" is still going strong despite the Depression.

Hannah remains hopeful that despite her family's clothes, the people will give her food, for it is obvious that she and her children are starving. When it is Hannah's turn, Miss Sadler, the white lady collecting the food stamps and handing out the food, takes a long look at Hannah and her family and denies them food, saying that they don't need it. Miss Sadler then chastises Hannah for trying to take food stamps away from people who really need them. To add insult to injury, Miss Sadler gives what would have been



Hannah's family's share of food stamps to a man well-known for gambling. The crowd starts laughing at Hannah, and Miss Sadler also starts giggling behind her hands. Hannah's husband and his mistress laugh at her as well. Her husband ends up leaving with the mistress and her food. Hannah never sees her husband again, but hears that he later dies with his mistress in a flood.

Hannah explains that after the food stamp incident, when Miss Sadler and the rest of the people laugh at her, her spirit is defeated and her life goes steadily downhill. She watches her children, one by one, die of starvation. The gambler comes around a few days later and gives her half of the food he has left, but it is too late for the children to be saved.

Hannah's spirit never recovers from the incident, her heart never recovers from her husband's desertion, and her body never recovers from nearly starving to death. Her body ages quickly, she has no pride left, and she becomes a prostitute for awhile in order to survive. In more recent years, she has started attending church again, but she is continually haunted in her dreams by the incident that marked the downhill turning point in her life. Hannah is haunted by Miss Sadler's grinning mouth hidden behind her hands while everyone laughed, and she believes it is at that moment when her spirit was crushed.

Hannah wants to seek revenge on Miss Sadler, to make her life miserable, as she sees this as a way to vindicate a wrong. Hannah specifically wants Miss Sadler's mouth to stop grinning. Rosie Tante tells her that Miss Sadler will not outlive Hannah by more than six months. Rosie Tante tells Hannah that she will use a potion consisting of Miss Sadler's hair, nail parings, urine, feces, and a piece of cloth containing her scent to ensure Miss Sadler's demise. Rosie Tante also has the apprentice (a narrator of this story) teach Hannah the ceremony for the curse-prayer and the curse-prayer itself that rootworkers use. The apprentice does not have it memorized, so she teaches Hannah by reciting the curse-prayer straight from a Zora Neale Hurston book, *Mules and Men*. Rosie Tante and Hannah recite the curse-prayer at the same time to be more effective and to beseech the Man-God to unleash death. Hannah is satisfied in believing that Miss Sadler will shortly come to her demise, which puts her more at peace.

Research finds that Miss Sadler soon married after the food stamp incident and is now Mrs. Holley; she has three grown children and grandchildren. Mrs. Holley lives in a big house and has seemingly had a good life with no tragedy in it. Acting on instruction by Rosie Tante, the apprentice makes a visit to Mrs. Holley and informs her that Rosie Tante has been commissioned by Hannah Kemhuff, who wants retribution for the wrong Mrs. Holley has done against her. At first, the name means nothing to Mrs. Holley, so the apprentice briefly describes the incident. Mrs. Holley apparently has no memory of the incident or how her actions caused the devastation of Hannah and her children's lives. Mrs. Holley feels contempt and scorn when she finds that the apprentice is associated with Rosie Tante, who she knows is into black magic.

The apprentice takes advantage of Mrs. Holley's disbelief and challenges her to prove her disbelief in rootworking by providing the ingredients needed for the potion; nail



pairings, strands of her hair, urine, feces and a piece of clothing containing her scent. If Mrs. Holley truly does not believe, she would hand these items over with no fear that the potion, once finished, will eat away at her. Mrs. Holley becomes highly agitated and faints.

Not long after the apprentice's visit to Mrs. Holley, Hannah Kemhuff dies. At her funeral, Mrs. Holley and her family's nanny are in attendance to ensure Hannah is dead. Several months later, Mrs. Holley dies. Before her death, Mrs. Holley became fearful of all black people after the apprentice's visit. Mrs. Holley took to always staying in her bedroom. She collected all stray hairs from her head and ate her fingernail parings. Mrs. Holley collected all her feces and urine and stored them into barrels that she kept in the closets in her home. The odor of her house became intolerable. Mrs. Holley was overcome with anxiety and had a constant frown on her mouth, which only death erases.

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff Analysis

In *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, Walker provides to the reader a glimpse into black magic and how it was used by black people to seek revenge and bestow fear on their oppressors.

Mrs. Holley ended up paying for her mistreatment of Hannah Kemhuff by living out her last months in fear and paranoia. The reader gets the impression that perhaps Mrs. Holley subconsciously knows that what she did to Hannah was wrong and by her fear of the curse this becomes evident. Unfortunately, Hannah Kemhuff ends up dying before Mrs. Holley and never gets the satisfaction of seeing this part of her wish/curse come true. Walker makes a statement by showing the power both women allowed each other to have over their lives and the ultimate devastating result of their bitterness and hatred.



Characters

Rosie Tante

A known rootworker who has been around a long time. Rosie Tante practices rootworking and is teaching the trade to her apprentice. Rosie Tante is very knowledgeable and keeps files on black people who may or may not come to her. She is well-versed in curse-prayers and healing, and for a price she uses her powers to do their will.

The Apprentice

The narrator of this short story. She is in the process of learning the rootworking trade. She is the one who, on Hannah Kemhuff's behalf, finally confronts Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley and helps cause Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley's eventual suffering and downfall.

Hannah Kemhuff

Hannah Kemhuff is the one in need of the rootworkers' services. She has come seeking vengeance on Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley for the wrong that was done by her years ago during the Depression. Hannah is a rundown woman who has had a miserable life. She looks older than her years. Hannah has a crushed spirit, a broken heart, and no more pride. Hannah has never recovered from the events that happened during the Depression due to the actions of Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley. Hannah has lived a life of bitterness and is still haunted by the grinning of Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley. Hannah wants Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley to suffer in life as she has, for then she will feel that justice has been served. After Rosie Tante agrees to help Hannah, Hannah regains her pride and is more at peace and can die knowing justice will be hers. Hannah dies before Mrs. Holley does.

Miss Sarah Sadler/Mrs. Holley

During the Depression, Miss Sadler, a white woman, has her upcoming wedding on her mind more than the people she is passing out food to. Miss Sadler makes a snap judgment on Hannah and her family and chastises them for trying to take food from people who need it. Despite Hannah's pleas, she and others laugh at Hannah. Miss Sadler never gives Hannah or her family a second thought. She marries, becomes Mrs. Holley and has children and grandchildren. Mrs. Holley lives in a big house and has had a good life. When she first hears that the rootworkers have been commissioned by Hannah, she is scornful of the black magic and is full of disbelief that any of that rootworker nonsense works. Later, Mrs. Holley becomes obsessed with making sure that none of her personal items will be able to be collected by the rootworker or Hannah Kemhuff. She eats her nail parings, collects her stray hairs, and collects her feces and

urine and stores them in barrels that she keeps in the house. She is overcome with anxiety and has a frown on her face, which only her eventual death erases.



Objects/Places

Tank of water

The tank of water that the rootworker, Tante Rosie, looks into glean information about her client. The tank of water is a ruse-she keeps files on all people hidden away.

Food stamps

During the Depression, the government gave out food stamps for families that were starving. Hannah and her family's food stamps are taken away before they can collect their food, due to a snap judgment made by Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley.



Themes

Racism/Sexism

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

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

Darkness of Marriage

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

Denial of Happiness/One's True Self

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



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

Style

Point of View

The story is told from two points of view, that of the narrator and that of Hannah Kemhuff herself. The story is told in the first person by the apprentice. The narrator is employed as an apprentice to Tante Rosie, an old black woman versed in the black magic art of "rootworking." She begins by giving a brief narrative of the day she met Hannah Kemhuff. The narrator is a bit overwhelmed by the experience, because she is new to the art of "rootworking" and has not memorized many of the essential prayers and curses. In between the narrator's setting of the story, Hannah Kemhuff begins to tell Tante Rosie of the incident with Ms. Sadler that crushed her spirit and sent her life plummeting in a downward spiral. It is at this time that the first-person narrative switches from the apprentice's perspective to Hannah's. At the end of Hannah's tragic tale, the first-person narrative switches back to the apprentice. The apprentice then proceeds to narrate the rest of the story.

Setting

The setting in this story shifts in the beginning from their present day to the past—specifically, during the Depression. The shifting of time and settings is easy for the reader to follow, even though there is no break in the continuity of the story. The shift occurs seamlessly because of the change of narrators. In the beginning, we are at Tante Rosie's place in present time. When Hannah starts to tell her story, the reader is taken back in time to during the Depression and how it affected Cherokee County. After her story, the reader is back in the present day at Tante Rosie's place. The main setting after Hannah tells her story is the home of Mrs. Holley, who lives six miles out in the country. After hearing about the rootworkers' being commissioned on Hannah Kemhuff's behalf, Mrs. Holley closes herself up in her room and refuses to come out.

Language and Meaning

In *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, there are two distinct places in which Walker intentionally uses certain language in order to have a strong impact in the story and on the reader. First, it should be noted that Walker attributes this story to the memory of Zora Neale Hurston. The curse-prayer used in this story is taken directly out of Hurston's book, *Mules and Men*. It is Walker's way of paying tribute to Hurston. The second occurs in the third chapter when the apprentice is confronting Mrs. Holley: the conversation between the protagonist by proxy and the antagonist is well written and excellently illustrates how the apprentice subtly undermines and manipulates Mrs. Holley.



Structure

In *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, the story is divided into four chapters. Walker employs this tactic to keep the pace and continuity of the story flowing, despite this short story's length: this story is 20 pages long, the longest story in this collection. The first chapter details Hannah's reasons for wanting revenge and ends with her employing the rootworkers to ensure her vengeance. The second chapter is brief and contains the curse-prayer Hannah must recite. The third chapter pertains to the finding and confronting of Miss Sadler, now Mrs. Holley. The apprentice is sent to ask for the items needed for the potion and inform Mrs. Holley about the rootworkers' being commissioned to right a wrong that was done to Hannah Kemhuff. The fourth and last chapter depicts Hannah's death and Mrs. Holley's downward descent into paranoia and eventual death.



Quotes

These quotes are taken from all of the short stories featured in the book, Flowers.

"She dreams; dragging herself across the world." (pg. 3)

"A squeeze around the flowers in her hands chokes off three and four and five years of breath." (pg. 6)

"She wonders what one does with memories in a brand-new life." (pg. 8)

"She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes." (pg. 11)

"But I fit into my new surroundings perfectly; like a jar of cold cream melting on a mirrored vanity shelf." (pg. 13)

"I console myself with this thought: My family tends to darken and darken as we get older. One day he may wake up in bed with a complete stranger." (pg. 15)

"Every time he tells me how peculiar I am for wanting to write stories he brings up having a baby or going shopping, as if these things are the same. Just something to occupy my time." (pg. 15)

"Now Ruel will find that I am not a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees. The moment of my deliverance is at hand!" (pg. 18)

"This hobby of his she heartily encouraged, relegating reading to the importance of scanning the funnies; and besides, it was something he could do at home, if she could convince him she would be completely silent for an evening, and, of course, if he would stay." (pg. 28,29)

"A final crack-up in her own home was impossible, she reasoned contemptuously, for she did not think her husband's lover bold enough to show herself on his wife's own turf." (pg. 30)

"She was panting and sweating, her ashen face slowly coloring with the belated rush of doomed comprehension." (pg. 33)

"The heat from the sun is oppressively hot but she does not feel its heat so much as its warmth, for there is a cold spot underneath the hot skin of her back that encloses her heart and reaches chilled arms around the bottom cages of her ribs." (pg. 36)

"Not treated as a man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast." (pg. 38)



"He could not forgive her the love she gave that knew nothing of master and slave." (pg. 39)

"Jealousy is being nervous about something that has never, and probably won't ever, belong to you." (pg. 42)

"She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her." (pg. 47)

"I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog." (pg. 48)

"Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks." (pg. 49)

"When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet." (pg. 58)

"I can survive as long as I need with the bitterness that has laid every day in my soul." (pg. 67)

"I pray that the sun shall not shed its rays on them in benevolence, but instead it shall beat down on them and burn them and destroy them." (pg. 71)

"I was moved by the fervor with which Mrs. Kemhuff prayed. Often she would clench her fists before her closed eyes and bite the insides of her wrists as the women do in Greece." (pg. 72)

"And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known." (pg. 81)

"Those who knew the hesitant creeping up on them of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church, and saw an invasion of privacy, which they struggled to believe they still kept." (pg. 82)

"She had looked at that picture for more years than she could remember, but never once had she really expected to see him." (pg. 85)

"His little eyes were partly open, as if he were peeping out of his hard wasted skull at the chilly room, and the forceful pulse of his breathing caused a faint rustling in the sheets near his mouth like the wind pushing damp papers in a shallow ditch." (pg. 89)

"Her deep sharp eyes set in the rough leather of her face had aged a moist hesitant blue that gave her a quick dull stare like a hawk's." (pg. 89)



"Gently she began to examine him, all the while moaning and humming some thin pagan tune that pushed against the sound of the wind and rain with its own melancholy power." (pg. 94)

"And the gorilla's feet, powerful and large and twitching with impatience, were the last things he saw before he was hurled out of the violent jungle of the world into nothingness and a blinding light." (pg. 105)

"He was not comfortable with the X, however, because he began to feel each morning that the day before he had not existed." (pg. 107)

"She might have been a spectacularly striking figure, with her cropped fluffy hair and her tall, statuesque body-her skin was good and surprisingly the scarification marks played up the noble severity of her cheekbones-but her eyes were too small and tended to glint, giving her a suspicious, beady-eyed look, the look of pouncing, of grabbing hold." (pg. 111)

"How long must I sit by my window before I lure you down from the sky? Pale lover who never knew the dance and could not do it!" (pg. 115)

"I bear your colors, I am in your livery, I belong to you. Will you not come down and take me! Or are you even less passionate than your father who took but could not show his face?" (pg. 115)

"In this way will the wife of a loveless, barren, hopeless Western marriage broadcast the joys of an enlightened religion to an imitative people." (pg. 118)

"She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment." (pg. 119)

"Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream." (pg. 119)

"When she passes him at the door his heart flutters like old newspapers in a gutter disturbed by a falling gust of wind." (pg. 122)

"The same camp that gobbled up his wife and daughter and made fertilizer from their bones." (pg. 125)

"She brings the odor of Southern jails into class with her, and hundreds of aching, marching feet, and the hurtful sound of the freedom songs he has heard from the church, the wailing of souls destined for bloody eternities at the end of each completely maddened street." (pg. 127)

"His ability to be drunk and sober at the same time made him an ideal playmate, for he was as weak as we were and we could usually best him in wrestling, all the while keeping a fairly coherent conversation going." (pg. 131)



"I was almost in tears, for these deaths upset me fearfully, and the thought of how much depended on me and my brother (who was such a ham most of the time) made me very nervous." (pg. 133)

"He was like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which finally fell." (pg. 137)



Topics for Discussion

These topics concern all of the short stories featured in the book, Flowers.

Why does Roselily go through with the wedding despite having misgivings and doubts about her future?

Will Roselily find her freedom in her new life?

If Myrna did not love Mordecai why does his using and betraying her lead to her breakdown?

Why hasn't Myrna already left Ruel? Why doesn't she leave him now?

Why does the narrator tolerate Jerome's abuse and treatment of her?

Why does the narrator become obsessed with Jerome's fictitious lover and not have anger toward or threaten Jerome?

Why didn't the father follow through on his original plan to just scare his daughter into chastity with his voice or threaten her with his shotgun?

Why didn't his daughter deny she had written the letter and deny her love in order to save her life?

Why does the mother ultimately decide to give the quilts to Maggie and not to Dee/Wangero?

Maggie and Dee/Wangero both have a different way of preserving their heritage. What are their differing ways and which way is better?

Why does Miss Sadler/Mrs. Holley continue to fear the rootworkers even after Hannah Kemhuff's death?

Despite Miss Sadler's/Mrs. Holley's protestations, does she believe in the power of the rootworkers?

Why did the old woman go to the "white" church instead of a "black" church?

Did Jesus really appear to the old woman or was she having a delusion?

Would Snooks have lived if Rannie Toomer allowed Sarah to attempt her home remedies sooner?

Would the mailman have acted any differently if Rannie's appearance were different and she were more intelligent?

Why do John's father's last thoughts center around his first wife and their son?



Why doesn't John show more interest in or even anger at his father?

Why doesn't the African nun forsake her vows and instead become a regular woman again, able to marry and have children?

By the end of the story, is the African nun still a true believer in the Catholic church's teachings?

Why was Myop unafraid at her discovery of the dead man?

Why did the remains of the hanging rope (and not the sight of the dead man itself) compel Myop to lay down her flowers?

Why don't Harriet and the French professor act on their desires for one the other?

Why does the French professor suffer at the realization of beauty?

Despite Mr. Sweet's being an alcoholic who was always drunk around the children, why did the family view him "like a piece of rare and delicate china"?

Why were so many of the "revivals" successful and why wouldn't they work on anyone else?