

Strong Horse Tea Study Guide

Strong Horse Tea by Alice Walker

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Strong Horse Tea

Strong Horse Tea Summary

The story is about a black mother, young and single, named Rannie Toomer. Her baby boy, Snooks, is dying of double pneumonia and whooping cough. Her baby is all Rannie has in the world. For five days Snooks has been sick and Rannie has not bathed in that time due to taking care of her sick baby. Rannie knows her baby boy is gravely ill and is waiting for the white doctor to come and make him better.

Sarah is an older black woman who is knowledgeable of old home remedies and knows magic as well. Sarah tries to convince Rannie to use on the baby some of the home remedies that she knows. Rannie will not allow Sarah to perform her home remedies on her baby for several reasons. Rannie doesn't believe in "that swamp magic" that Sarah practices. She remembers all of the home remedies that she had taken as a child had come close to killing her. She also wants a white doctor, for she knows he has medicine and shots that he uses on white people that can make her baby better and strong. Rannie has sent for a white doctor by way of her white mailman hours earlier and has been waiting ever since. Rannie believes that a white doctor would not ignore her pleas to help a dying black baby. Sarah, on the other hand, is highly skeptical and knows that the white doctor is not coming.

The story then shifts to the white mailman's encounter with Rannie earlier that day when she asks him to send the white doctor to help her sick baby. This part of the story is told from the mailman's perspective.

The mailman views Rannie Toomer as an ignorant black woman. In the past, he has had to explain about the circulars and advertisements in the mail that Rannie receives: Rannie wondered when the stuff in the advertisements would be delivered, and the mailman had to explain to her that she needed money to buy the items in the advertisements. Rannie has no money, so she didn't understand why she kept receiving the circulars. The mailman explained that they sent the advertisements to everyone whether they could afford the items or not. The mailman thought her ignorant when she asked for extra circulars to paper her house with to keep the wind from coming inside.

Today the mailman was instantly repulsed by Rannie Toomer due to her bad breath and unwashed appearance. When Rannie approaches his car in the rain and attempts to tell him about her sick baby and need for a doctor, he hardly pays attention to her. He is too busy trying to avoid her odor and keep her from getting the inside of his car wet. The mailman feels irritated with Rannie because she clings to the car and won't let him go. She keeps ranting on and on about something concerning Snooks and "nemonia" and "shots" and how she wants a doctor. He feels aggrieved that colored people always wanted white people to do something for them. The mailman attempts to appease Rannie so she will let him go and tells her he hopes her baby will be all right, that he'll see what he can do. The mailman then suggests that she try Sarah's home remedies.

Rannie becomes even more emphatic and upset, grabbing and shaking his shoulder and saying no, she wants a real doctor. The mailman begins to get angry with her and repeats that he'll see what he can do, disengages himself, and leaves. He is repulsed that Rannie touched him in her present state.

Rannie is upset about the mailman's suggestion about using home remedies and is further agitated when Sarah shows up at her house wanting to use her "nigger magic." Rannie lets Sarah stay with her but threatens her with physical violence if she tries to use any of her magic or home remedies on the child.

Though much time has passed and still no doctor shows, Rannie still believes the doctor is coming. Sarah finally convinces Rannie that the white doctor is not coming because the mailman had gone and fetched her instead and gave her Rannie's message. Defeated, Rannie is finally convinced and begs Sarah to do whatever she has to do to keep her baby from dying. Rannie feels heavy with guilt for the time wasted waiting for the doctor and postponing Sarah's helping her baby.

After examining Snooks, Sarah announces that the baby is dying and that there is only one thing to do that might help him. She tells Rannie that she needs to get Snooks some strong "horse tea" for the baby. Rannie goes out into the rain, chases down a horse and uses her shoe to catch the horse's urine. While Rannie is collecting the urine, Sarah sees that baby Snooks has died. After Rannie collects the urine, the horse kicks her down. Rannie manages not to drop the shoe filled with urine but notices that her shoe is leaking. Rannie puts her own mouth over it to stop the leak and runs back home to give horse tea to her baby, unaware that her baby is already dead.

Strong Horse Tea Analysis

In *Strong Horse Tea*, Alice Walker introduces a new theme: the white man's medicine versus the black woman's home remedies. Rannie Toomer is a young black mother desperately seeking a way to make her sick baby well. Abandoned by the mailman and white doctor, the young mother Rannie is denied the opportunity to see if Sarah's home remedy would have worked. The author demonstrates the total belief that the young black mother had in the benevolence of white doctors, and the heavy price she ended up paying for that belief.

Characters

Rannie Toomer

A young, unmarried black girl. She is not pretty or smart and her baby is all she has in the world. Rannie has faith that her white mailman will send the white doctor to help her sick baby. She has faith in white medicine and no faith in Sarah's black magic or home remedies, but she changes her mind when she realizes the doctor is not coming, and believes wholeheartedly that Sarah's methods can save her baby, because she is desperate for her baby to live.

Sarah

An old neighbor lady with the reputation of knowing how magic came about and of performing magic herself. She is well-versed in home remedies to aid people who are sick. She is the nearest thing to a "doctor" that the black community has. Sarah has no faith or trust in white people.

Mailman

A white mailman who ignores Rannie's pleas for him to fetch a white doctor, because he finds her ignorant and repulsive. He represents the white attitude of disdain for the black community.

Baby Snooks

Rannie's gravely ill baby suffering from double pneumonia and whooping cough who ends up dying from his illness.

Objects/Places

Strong horse tea

Sarah's home remedy is urine from a horse, the only thing that might help the dying baby live.

Home remedies

Remedies and magic that the black community uses to help cure their own or a loved one's illness.

White medicine

White medicine described as shots, vaccinations, and other medicines that the white community uses to treat their sick.

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

Strong Horse Tea is told in the third person. The point of view at the beginning of the story is that of the baby's mother, Rannie Toomer, a young black woman placing all of her trust in the benevolence of the white mailman and white doctor and her faith in white medicine. The point of view then shifts to the white mailman and the reader can see that his prejudice and disgust over Rannie's ignorance keeps him from the understanding the direness of the situation. The perspective once again shifts back to Rannie, who is still waiting for the doctor. Rannie realizes the doctor is not coming and finally follows Sarah's instructions for a home remedy. While Rannie is out collecting horse urine, Sarah sees that the baby has died. The point of view switches back to Rannie, who not knowing the fate of her child, goes to extreme measures to collect and protect the horse urine.

Setting

In *Strong Horse Tea*, Walker incorporates the same type of atmosphere, whatever the setting. Inside Rannie's house, outside with the postman, or outside when she is trying to collect horse urine, the atmosphere of darkness is ever present in this story. It is constantly raining hard outside and the winter cold can still be felt, as a baby lays inside a house gravely ill. Even though a fire is in the fireplace, the cold permeates the room. The baby lays on the bed in a little grave-like mound. At times, the baby's struggle to breathe is louder than the downpour outside, while at other times the breathing is very faint, until it stops altogether. The wind is blowing hard outside. At the end of the story it is dark outside, it's raining, and there is thunder and lightning.

Language and Meaning

Walker uses language in this story to illustrate the futility of Rannie's requesting help from the mailman. Due to the mailman's view of Rannie as ignorant, Rannie's own use of language further confirms the mailman's belief and results in his not really listening to the pleas for help. He sees Rannie's pleas as her "gabbing away about 'Snooks' and 'NEWmonia' and 'shots' and how she wanted a 'REAL doctor.'" This is Walker's comment on the white man's view of the black woman's ignorance.

Structure

Walker writes this story as one whole with three breaks in it to help the reader follow the change of perspective from character to character. Walker also uses these breaks to go back in time and inform the reader of what happened earlier in the day and also to let

the reader know what is going on outside at the same time as what is happening inside the house.

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 you 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?