

# **To Hell With Dying Study Guide**

**To Hell With Dying by Alice Walker**

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# To Hell With Dying

## To Hell With Dying Summary

This story revolves around a beloved neighbor, Mr. Sweet, and the many "revivals" a neighboring family participates in to bring him back from the brink of death. The revival consists of the whole family going to visit Mr. Sweet, who lay on his deathbed. The children's father would say, "To hell with dying, man," addressing the dying Mr. Sweet, and "These children want Mr. Sweet!" The children would take those words as their cue and would crowd around Mr. Sweet and throw themselves on the bed with him. The youngest of the children would kiss Mr. Sweet all over his face and tickle him until he laughed. Mr. Sweet would then make a swift recovery and continue to live.

Mr. Sweet was an older man, a diabetic and an alcoholic. He was a fisherman but was best known for playing the guitar. Mr. Sweet would come around to play with the children, and their mother would let them play with Mr. Sweet even though he was always very drunk and on the verge of passing out. He would also play his guitar and sing for the family. The youngest child, a girl, especially loved Mr. Sweet. She loved playing with his white kinky hair and believed him when he called her his "Princess." At six years of age, she felt pretty because of him; at eight and a half, she felt gorgeous. Others would tell her she looked like a baby monkey, but because of Mr. Sweet she felt beautiful.

Sometimes Mr. Sweet would need the "revival" when he was feeling very depressed and very drunk. Other times Mr. Sweet would need the "revival" when he was legitimately sick, such as the time he had a stroke. Whether the ailment was mental or physical, the "revival" always worked. It was always the job of the youngest child (who narrates the story) to tickle, kiss, and hug Mr. Sweet. As the years passed, and her siblings grew up, it was up to only her and her brother, along with their parents, to revive Mr. Sweet. Her brother would grab Mr. Sweet's guitar and start playing and singing, acting like Mr. Sweet. This would make Mr. Sweet happy. Sometimes Mr. Sweet would start crying around the children and they would comfort him. This never embarrassed them because they loved him.

Years passed with many successful "revivals" of Mr. Sweet. The children did not realize the finality of death, because in their experience they were always able to triumph over it. They also did not realize that they only had this power over Mr. Sweet, not over anyone else. Later, the narrator is working on her doctorate when she gets word that Mr. Sweet is dying and is asked if she could please come quickly. The narrator doesn't hesitate and rushes to Mr. Sweet's home, though she lives many miles away and has to take a plane and drive for a long distance.

Mr. Sweet is in his 90s now and lies in the same bed in which he has lain many times before when he was "on the brink of death." The narrator's parents are already there, looking old and frail themselves, which surprises the narrator. Her father bends down



and tells Mr. Sweet, "To hell with dying, man! My daughter is home to see Mr. Sweet!" She is the only sibling there, for her brother is serving in the war in Asia. She caresses Mr. Sweet's face; his eyes open and he gently smiles at her. His eyes twinkle at her and she puts her head on the pillow next to his and they stare at one another for a long moment. He caresses her face and she closes her eyes as his hands cup around her face, when she opens her eyes Mr. Sweet has died. She cannot believe that their "revival" failed. Her parents give her Mr. Sweet's guitar like he wanted, for he knew this time he would not be saved. She plays one of the songs Mr. Sweet would always play and at that moment realizes that Mr. Sweet had been her first love.

## To Hell With Dying Analysis

In *To Hell With Dying*, Alice Walker concludes her series of short stories with a positive theme: love. The old man in this story, who is only referred to as Mr. Sweet, is an alcoholic and has many brushes with death throughout the years. He develops a special relationship with the narrator of the story, who was a small girl when several "revivals" of his health took place. The narrator, along with her brothers and sisters, would gather around Mr. Sweet on his sickbed, tickle and play with him, and revive his spirits until he would miraculously become well again. These revivals serve to demonstrate how the love of a child can heal the heart of a sick and dying man who has lost all hope in life. In turn, Mr. Sweet lavishes praise on his favorite, the narrator, who he calls a beautiful Princess. This heals her own heart, for others have referred to her as a baby monkey and tried to make her feel bad about the way she looks.

The time eventually comes when the narrator, now a grown woman, is called back to the bedside of Mr. Sweet for one last revival. As they gaze at one another for the last time, the narrator closes her eyes and opens them again to find Mr. Sweet has passed. Even though one of the main characters dies in this story, the reader is left with a feeling of love and understanding. Through the relationship between Mr. Sweet and the narrator, Walker proves that love can bridge the gap between old and young.



# Characters

## Mr. Sweet

An older black man who suffers from diabetes. He is an alcoholic, fisherman, and guitar player, a beloved neighbor to the narrator's family. He plays and wrestles with the children and lavishes praises on the narrator when she is a child. Mr. Sweet is a nice old man who also suffers from bouts of depression. He at many times is at the brink of death but always pulls through once the neighboring family has given him a "revival." At the revival he feels loved, happy, and glad that the children attempt to immitate him on his guitar. Mr. Sweet has a special bond and love with the narrator. Mr. Sweet dies a very old man, but is surrounded with love.

## Narrator/Mr. Sweet's favorite

In the beginning of this story, a very young girl who looks to Mr. Sweet as a beloved playmate. She comforts him when he cries and tickles him on his deathbed until he laughs. She feels like a gorgeous princess around Mr. Sweet, who lavishes her with praises while others say she looks like a monkey. She truly believes that Mr. Sweet is dying and that only by playing her part can she save him. Due to the many successful revivals she has participated in, she never gains an appreciation of death or an understanding of the finality of it. In the end, when the revival "fails," she (a grown woman now) comes to the realization that Mr. Sweet was her first love.

## Narrator's father

The father of the narrator and friend to Mr. Sweet. He has a vital part to play in the "revivals," as he gives the children their cue by saying, "To hell with dying, man!" and "These children want Mr. Sweet!"

## Narrator's mother

The mother of the narrator and friend to Mr. Sweet. She allows Mr. Sweet to play with her children even though he is always drunk. She also attends the "revivals" with her family.

## Narrator's brother

The narrator's brother who also participates in these "revivals." He loves Mr. Sweet and plays with him. The brother's part in the revivals is to immitate Mr. Sweet on the guitar and sing one of his songs. He is unable to attend the last revival, for he is in the war in Asia.



## Objects/Places

### Mr. Sweet's guitar

Mr. Sweet's old steel guitar, which he would still play and sing songs to the children. During the "revivals," the narrator's brother would pick it up and play it, doing an impression of Mr. Sweet. After Mr. Sweet's death, he leaves the guitar to the narrator, who plays on it Mr. Sweet's favorite song.

### Mr. Sweet's hair and beard

Mr. Sweet's long, white, kinky hair and beard were loved by the children, especially the narrator. She would put her hands in it, comb it, and braid it. The narrator was always devastated when Mr. Sweet would cut it.



# 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

*To Hell With Dying* is told in the first person. The narrator is a 24-year-old black woman who is reminiscing about her beloved neighbor, Mr. Sweet, and the many successful "revivals" she and her family participated in on his behalf throughout her childhood. The love and nostalgia she feels are evident in her telling of the story.

## Setting

Although this story takes place in the South, Walker's focus is mainly on the relationship between the narrator and Mr. Sweet. The only emphasis impressed upon any particular setting is Mr. Sweet's shack: specifically, the bed in his room that he lays on when he is dying and where their "revivals" take place.

## Language and Meaning

Walker's use of language in *To Hell With Dying* deviates from the language used in most of her short stories in this collection. In keeping with the narrator's character, Walker writes the entire story with obvious nostalgic and loving overtones. Missing from this story is the feeling of darkness or oppression. Even though Mr. Sweet is an alcoholic, no judgment is ever passed.

## Structure

Because this story is told in the first person, it is a continuous flow of background information about Mr. Sweet, mixed with memories of how the narrator and her siblings played with him. The story then describes the "revivals" and ends with the woman being summoned for the last time, and Mr. Sweet's 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?