

# **The Welcome Table Study Guide**

## **The Welcome Table by Alice Walker**

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# The Welcome Table

## The Welcome Table Summary

This story is about an old, rundown black woman who staggers the necessary distance in the freezing cold to attend an all-white church. The white people are at a loss when they see her near the entrance of the church and do not know what to do. Some people take her in as she is, an old black woman with a mildewed dress that is missing buttons. She is lean and wrinkled with blue-brown eyes. Her appearance makes some of the white people think of black workers, maids, cooks; others think of black mistresses or jungle orgies. Still others think that she is a foreshadow of what is to come - black people invading the one place that it still considered the white person's sanctuary, their church. They see her and transfer their fear of blacks onto her.

The old woman makes her way inside the church. The reverend says something to the old woman, but no one knows what and the old woman does not respond. Inside the church, the old woman sits at the first bench in the back; she is shivering. Outside it is freezing and inside the church it is cold. The rest of the white people sit at the front of the church away from her.

The usher approaches the old woman and tells her to leave, but the old black woman shoos him with her hand and tells him to go away. The women of the church finally take the matter into their hands and dare or demand their hesitant husbands to throw the old colored woman out of the church. The white women look with contempt at the old woman in her bedraggled state and are insulted that their husbands expect them to sit in the same church as her. This sufficiently motivates the husbands to grab the old woman and physically throw her out of the church into the freezing cold. The white women feel vindicated and hateful toward the old black woman. No one at the church speaks of the incident afterward, and the church service begins.

The old lady is surprised to find herself outside, for she had been singing a song in her head. The old lady looks down the highway and sees something that makes her smile, laugh, sing, and jump up and down in joy and excitement: the old lady sees Jesus himself walking down the highway toward her. He looks exactly like a picture she stole out of a white woman's Bible.

When Jesus approaches her, he instructs that she follow him. The old woman happily obliges. They walk in silence for a while, and then the old woman tells Jesus the story of her life, how she has worked for, cleaned for, and nursed the white people. Jesus listens and looks at her with kindness. The old lady indignantly recounts to Jesus how she was just thrown out of the white people's church. Jesus smiles at her and she instantly feels better. She tells Jesus of how she has his picture hanging over her bed. She alternately sings for Jesus, talks to him, and walks in silence beside him. They pass her house and the old woman doesn't even notice. She doesn't know where they are going but knows it will be wonderful. She feels as if she can walk forever by His side.



The white people from the church never finds out what happened to the old black woman who tried to attend their church. The white people do hear of a black woman who died on the highway after having apparently walked herself to death. They think this woman is silly and do not connect the two black women as one and the same. Black families witnessed the old lady walking by herself down the highway, sometimes singing, talking, and walking in silence, smiling. No one knows where she was going all by herself; they just assume she was on her way to visit some relatives.

## The Welcome Table Analysis

Alice Walker begins this short story with some words from a Spiritual:

*"I'm going to sit at the Welcome table  
Shout my troubles over  
Walk and talk with Jesus  
Tell God how you treat me  
One of these days!"*

Ms. Walker then proceeds to tell a story that parallels this Spiritual in many aspects. In *The Welcome Table*, an old black woman attempts to attend a "white" church. The white people at first do not know what to do. The old woman proceeds to go in and sit down in the back.

Some of the white people see her as she is while others see her as foreshadowing what is to come: black people invading one of the last remaining sanctuaries for white people, their church. In the old black woman, they see the beginning of the end of their separate existence. The white people see her and transfer their own fear of blacks, "a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known." To the white people, the old woman herself is a symbol of their own hate, ignorance, and fear, of blacks they have known and of what is to come.

It is the women of the church who rile up and dare their men into action. The men physically grab the old woman and throw her out. Interestingly, it is women who instigate action against the poor old black woman for it is they who are the most insulted and threatened by her presence. The white women are the most affronted by the old black woman's presence because within them is the knowledge that they have something in common with her; they are women and they too will one day grow old. It is this deeper knowledge and the strong denial that stems from it that becomes their driving force to ostracize and distance her from them.

After she is kicked out of the church, the old lady sees Jesus and walks with him. There are two points of interest here: the first is that Jesus appears to her not in the white man's church but outside of it; secondly, that Jesus looks just like a picture of him that she has stolen out of a white woman's Bible-in other words, that she sees Jesus as a white man. However, unlike the white men she has known, this white man, Jesus, offers her kindness and total acceptance. She feels overjoyed, full of contentment and peace.



Although the old woman dies at the end of the story and an argument could be made that she was walking alone, this story has a different feeling to it than the other stories in Walker's collection. Whereas the other stories highlight tragedy, despair, hopelessness, and a life of some type of bondage or death, this story contains hope and leaves the reader with a good feeling. The story gives hope that people who have lived a life of servitude and poor treatment will, in the end, find kindness, acceptance, and joy.



# Characters

## Old Black Woman

Nearly blind, with a lean build and a grayish tone to her skin. She wears a mildewed black dress with missing buttons and a grease-stained headrag covering her pigtails. She has blue-brown eyes, is ashen in appearance and very wrinkled. She is perspiring from her walk and is shivering from the cold. She enters the white church and sits, singing in her head. She is physically thrown out of the church. She sees Jesus walking down the highway and is giddy with joy. Jesus tells her to follow him and she does, walking alongside him. He looks just like she thought he would, and he listens to her sing and talk to him. She feels great beside him and can walk as long as he wants. She tells about her hard works for whites and the injustices done to her. She feels his kindness and instantly feels better. The old black woman walks down the highway past her house. She does not know where she is going. She is later found dead on the highway, having walked herself to death.

## Jesus

Jesus appears as a white man walking down the street in a long white robe trimmed in gold around the neck and hem. Jesus has on a red cape. Over his left arm he carries a blue blanket. He is wearing sandals. He has long brown hair and a beard. His eyes are brown and has wrinkles either from the sun or from smiling a lot. He tells the old woman to follow him as he walks down the highway. He listens to her talk and smiles at her with kindness.



# Objects/Places

## Church

The church in the story is where the white people attend. The white people view their church as one of the last remaining sanctuaries left to them—a sanctuary from black people.

## Highway

The highway in the story is where the old woman first sees Jesus. He asks her to follow him and she does, walking along the highway. It is also on the highway where the old woman is later found dead.

## The old black woman

The old black woman herself is a symbol to the white people. To the white people she represents many of their fears: a fear of blacks, a fear of the old, of the unknown, of the known, of black people they know, of black people they don't know, and of their hatred.



# 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 Welcome Table* is told in the third person and shifts the point of view from which the story is told. The beginning of the story is told from the white people's perspectives as they see an old black woman come to their church and go inside. Inside the church, the point of view switches to the usher who tells the old black lady to leave. The point of view then switches back to the white women inside the church, who take it as a personal insult and feel the most threatened about the old black lady being at their church. They rouse their husbands to throw the old lady out. The perspective then changes to the old black lady. This constant changing of point of view is useful in that it portrays the fears, thoughts, and feelings of almost everyone in the story. Firsthand, the reader is able to know what the people are thinking and why. In the end, the point of view briefly returns to the white people who were at church that day. The story ends with the perspective of some black families who witnessed the old lady walking down the highway.

## Setting

The story starts on a Sunday morning at the steps of the church that white people attend. The focus moves briefly inside the church where it is cold. As the story progresses the setting moves to the highway located outside the church. It is freezing outside. It is interesting to note that the old black woman does not find Jesus inside the "white" church but outside of it. Also of interest; prior to meeting Jesus, the old black woman is cold and shivering. After meeting Jesus, no mention is made of the woman's being cold or shivering. Walker does not give a specific time period in which the story takes place or a specific location. This might have been done to make the story timeless.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in *The Welcome Table* differs from Alice Walker's other stories in that Walker is very descriptive in her details of the old black woman's appearance and the appearance of Jesus. Walker is also detailed when describing the white people's different emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Walker provides insight into all the characters with her word choices, and by doing so, makes a simple story more profound.

## Structure

Walker writes this story straight through for the most part with only two breaks. The first break comes immediately after the old woman is thrown out of the church. The point of view then shifts to the old black woman whose thoughts and feelings were unknown to

the reader up to this point. The second break occurs after the old woman is walking with Jesus. Walker uses the break to shift forward in time in the white people's perspective.



## 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?