

We Drink the Wine in France Study Guide

We Drink the Wine in France by Alice Walker

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We Drink the Wine in France

We Drink the Wine in France Summary

This short story is told in eight sections. The story switches back and forth between Harriet and the professor and their thoughts and actions, all told in the voice of an outsider narrator. Harriet is a young girl attending the professor's French class. The professor is a thin, balding man, a different nationality than she.

The first segment finds Harriet and her French professor together, as he bends to help her as she is sitting at her desk during her French lesson. There is a moment when their eyes meet that the French professor is aware of her and she of him on a physical level. He is startled and immediately backs away. Harriet briefly feels snubbed because of his actions. The professor returns to his own desk and surveys the classroom. He feels that foreign children are far worse than foreign adults. The professor looks again at Harriet, who never brings her French schoolwork and is constantly daydreaming. The bell rings and she does not hear it, lost in her thoughts as she is. For a moment their eyes meet again, then it is over. She leaves and his heart beats rapidly as she passes him.

The second segment is about the professor collecting his mail from the post office: he has received a letter from Mexico. He has plans to leave Mississippi for Mexico in the summer, since he has been in Mississippi for three years and it is time to move on. The professor tends to move on as soon as he becomes aware of the beauty of a place. He tries to ignore the beauty, but he ultimately fails and he has to go away, for the beauty hurts him. He believes that Mexico's beauty will take longer to find him, and when it does he will relocate once again further south. He acknowledges that his escape from beauty has driven him across the world.

The third segment is about Harriet. Harriet thinks her name is ugly and wonders if it would sound better in French. Harriet is not dumb, though the French professor believes her to be. She is intelligent, reads many books, and tries not only to comprehend the information but also make it a part of her, so that it sustains her like food. Out of everyone, she is the student most anxious for knowledge. Harriet sees her French professor with his mail and watches him read his letter. She feels his panic and wonders if he has just received news that someone has died.

The fourth segment finds Harriet having a sexual encounter in a car in which she feels no enjoyment, but pain. She tells her partner that it was good but is really referring to the French phrases she was practicing in her mind while he was making love to her. They rush back to school, afraid they will be late. If they are locked out she will have to scale over a fence, for she could be expelled, but they make it in time after all. The guard who has been drinking winks at her and tries to smell her. Harriet ponders this offense and attempts to construct a sentence in French about it.



The fifth segment finds the French professor eating a meal, bland, as his ulcer requires it to be. He wonders if Harriet notices this ailment of his or how it effects him. He immediately squashes these thoughts and tells himself that he has to stop thinking about Harriet. He reminds himself that he is old and has experienced death firsthand and she is young and her whole life is ahead of her. The magazine he has with him contains his own story about his life in a concentration camp. His wife and daughter were killed at the concentration camp, and it is hinted at that his parents were killed as well. He was at the concentration camp for seven years before his escape. Thanks to the teachings of his parents, he was already fluent in French when he arrived in France. The magazine has sensationalized his story and his life. The magazine has also informed its readers that he is now a French professor teaching at a school for black girls in the South. The professor is angered at the acknowledgment of his existence.

The sixth segment finds Harriet, naked, looking at her body in the glass. She fantasizes that the French professor climbs through her window, undresses, and lies down with her. They do not immediately make love, for he is older and not in a rush. He caresses her as she asks questions about the tattoo of numbers he has on his wrist, which he continually attempts to hide. She knows nothing about his history or even her own. She wants to comfort him and convince him not to hide it away. Only after they have talked do they make love. She doesn't want to make him young again, for she feels that she is in the same place as he is now. A knock at the door ends Harriet's fantasy and she quickly puts on her nightgown and gets into the bed.

The seventh segment finds the French professor in bed also fantasizing about his "stupid" pupil, Harriet. Harriet is younger than any grandchild of his could be; he continues to see Harriet as young, though, but not a child. In her he sees her people's history, their sufferings and their longings. She has imprinted herself on his mind. He fantasizes about using his earnings from the sale of his story to buy two tickets to Mexico so that he can take her with him. He imagines them lying on the beach together and him giving her all his love. The French professor awakens from this dream crying, soaked in his own sweat. He now is thinking of what to say in his resignation letter and thinking about getting some brochures about South America.

The last segment has Harriet practicing her French phrases on her way into class, only to find that the professor has moved on to new phrases that he has her say in repetition. Afterward, he hides behind his desk for the final time.

We Drink the Wine in France Analysis

In *We Drink the Wine in France*, Alice Walker tells the story of a French professor and his pupil, Harriet, and their attraction to and longing for one another. The French professor is a concentration camp survivor; the concentration camp claimed the lives of his wife and daughter before he escaped. He is an older man who feels that most of his miserable life is behind him and only death awaits. He is drawn to Harriet partly because of her youth and vitality, yet those are the very qualities that makes him deny himself a relationship or affair with her.



Harriet is also attracted and drawn to her French professor. Harriet is young but feels trapped and tired of her station in life. Harriet wants knowledge and hungers for it. She does not mind her French professor's age-she would find comfort in an older man who was not in a rush to have her. Unlike with the French professor, it is not the issue of her youth that keeps her from pursuing a relationship with him. Harriet does not pursue an affair because she feels inferior due to her lack of knowledge and being a foreigner in his eyes.

The professor has been running away from life's beauty since his escape from the concentration camp. He attempts to ignore the beauty of a place and its people because it is painful to him. When he is overcome by the beauty of a place, he escapes it by going south and finding a new place to get lost in.

Throughout this story, French is used. Harriet uses French to escape a situation she finds unpleasant; for instance, having unwanted, painful sex, or when she is offended. Harriet immediately thinks about French and practices phrases or attempts to construct a sentence in French. The professor has used French as a vehicle to establish himself and a way of escape. He once escaped to France, and his knowledge of French helped him establish himself. His ability to speak French and teach it helps him to keep relocating to different places and still find work. He believes Harriet is stupid because of her misuse of the French language and not doing her work.

Although the professor writes his life story and has it published in a magazine, he does not want anyone in his class to know that he was in a concentration camp. He hides the tattoo on his wrist and readjusts his clothes to cover it. He is not always successful and Harriet has seen it; however, she does not know history enough to understand what his tattoo means. She is puzzled why he put a tattoo there if all he was going to do was cover it. She longs to ask him about the tattoo and encourage him not to hide it away.

The story ends with both of them denying themselves the joy, solace, and kinship they would find with each other. The ending finds Harriet still feeling rejected and inferior due to her ignorance, and the French professor hiding himself and running away from the beauty and joy life still has to offer him.



Characters

The French Professor

An older, very thin man who is balding and has an ulcer. He was in a concentration camp for seven years before his escape to France. Seeing beauty in his surroundings hurts him, and when the pain becomes too much he leaves for some place farther south. He feels very old and that his miserable life is almost over. He is attracted and drawn to a student in his class, Harriet; even though he views her as stupid, he can't stop thinking about her. He lectures himself that he is too old and she is too young and has her whole life ahead of her, but he fantasizes about being with her and giving her all the love he has left. His life story is published in a magazine and he is outraged that they refer to his miserable existence. He is tempted to take Harriet with him to Mexico, but he denies himself the affair, the relationship, and even the acknowledgment of it and plans to move on.

Harriet

A young black student attending an all-girls school in Mississippi. Harriet appears dumb to her French professor, but is actually a smart girl who desires to gain all the knowledge she can. She feels drawn to the French professor and thinks and fantasizes about him. She longs to be able to talk with him, ask him questions, and become his lover. Harriet is a daydreamer type. She is also very aware of her own reality, if not that of her own people. Harriet feels confined and trapped. She tolerates being made love to in a car, but gets no pleasure from it or from the young man. She feels more on the level of the French professor. Harriet hopes to impress him with her French but fails to do so. Her wish to become his lover and seek comfort and provide solace to him does not come true.



Objects/Places

Concentration camp

The concentration camp is where the French professor suffered for seven years and where his family was killed.

French

It is the French language that helped the professor when he escaped from the concentration camp and went to France. His knowledge of French is what enables the professor to run across the world and find employment. It is also French that Harriet uses to escape from reality. When a boy is having sex with her and it is more painful than pleasurable, Harriet practices her French in her mind. When Harriet is suffering through humiliation and an injustice, she immediately attempts to think of a way to explain how she feels in French.



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

In Walker's *We Drink the Wine in France*, the story is told in the third person, through two alternating perspectives. Each section after the first one alternates the perspective from which the story is being told and thus gives insight into that character. The perspective switches back and forth between the old weary French professor and his youthful student Harriet. Even though there are no major physical interactions between the two main characters, by knowing both characters' thoughts and dreams, one knows that inwardly there is a connection.

Setting

This story is set in Mississippi at an all-girls school. The story never gives a specific year in which it takes place, but one knows it is after the Nazi regime. Harriet resides in a dorm-type setting. The French professor has picked Mississippi in which to live and work because its beauty is not obvious. However, the French professor is to relocate to Mexico because he can no longer ignore the beauty of Mississippi or its people. He never reaches Mexico, for it is the setting of his fantasies about himself and Harriet. The story ends with the French professor planning to relocate further south.

Language and Meaning

Walker makes use of the different language, French, interspersed throughout this story. It is French that helped the professor when he escaped from the concentration camp and went to France. His knowledge of French is what enables the professor to run across the world and have employment. It is also French that Harriet uses to escape from reality. When a boy is having sex with her and it is more painful than pleasurable, Harriet practices her French in her mind. When Harriet is suffering through humiliation and an injustice, she immediately attempts to think of a way to explain in French how she feels. It is also French and the recitation of French that bring the two main characters close enough to become aware of one another.

Structure

Walker's *We Drink the Wine in France* is divided into eight sections. The first section is used to set the scene and introduce the main characters. Each section after the first one alternates the perspective from which the story is being told and gives insight into that character. The perspective switches back and forth between the French professor and Harriet. This technique keeps the reader's interest and quickens the pace of the story.



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?