



## LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S "THE FLOWERS"

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11474000>

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 24<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Accepted: 30<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Online: 31<sup>th</sup> May 2024

### KEY WORDS

*The analysis of Alice  
Walker's 'The Flowers'*

### ABSTRACT

*This article is about analysis of Walker's story 'Flowers' and its basic features and gender issues that expressed in the novels of Alice Walker and it also gives essential plot of the story. 'The Flowers' is a 1973 short story by Alice Walker. Running to just two pages and under 600 words, the story can be regarded as an example of flash fiction or micro-fiction. It tells of a ten-year-old girl's discovery, while out picking flowers, of the skeleton of an African-American man who was lynched in the Deep South of America.*

Alice Walker, who was born in Eatonton, Georgia in 1944, is a Pulitzer Prize winning author. Walker's creative vision is taken from her past experiences and she uses them in her novels. "The Flowers," a short story from the collection titled *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, was written about Myop a ten year old African American girl who's parents were poor sharecroppers in rural Georgia during a heightened time of racial violence.

The story is about a young girl's sudden fall from innocence. Myop is happy and carefree as she skips around her family's cabin playing with the animals. She does not look beyond the splendor of her free and comfortable childhood. On this day she decides to explore the woods as she had done many times with her mother in late autumn while gathering nuts.

Myop then leaves the safety and peacefulness of her family's sharecropper cabin to search for new and wonderful flowers. This summer morning she makes her own path and finds herself about a mile from home in unfamiliar surroundings. The cove she had come upon was gloomy, damp and had a mysterious silence.

In her quest to recapture the happiness of the morning, and find her way back to her cabin, she stumbles onto the remains of a man who had clearly been killed in a lynching. She sees the brittleness of his death when she discovered his "large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken" showing that might have been beaten before his murder. She then looks up at a tree and sees the rotted remains of a noose. "Myop laid down her flowers" was a sign of releasing her youthfulness, as she was forced to face one of the most violent forms of racism. The destruction of her childhood innocence was recognized at the end of the story with the statement "And the summer was over."



Alice Walker dramatically shows what impact it is on a child and how quickly she can lose her childhood innocence with the realization of how prominent racial violence was in rural Georgia during segregation.

Alice Walker's "The Flowers" is a very short story, less than 600 words, about a ten-year-old African-American girl who makes a life changing discovery while out gathering flowers in the woods. It's a popular short story for students. Can't find "The Flowers" Sparknotes? Not to worry. This analysis starts with a short story summary then looks at themes.

In the plot summary, Myop is a ten-year-old African-American girl living in the Deep South in the United States. In late summer, she is out collecting flowers near her family's home. It is revealed that her family are sharecroppers: tenants whom a landlord permits to work a patch of land in exchange for a share of the crop they grow. This system was common in the South following the American Civil War and many freed African-American slaves became sharecroppers.

Carrying a stick, Myop skips along past the pigpen and henhouse her family keep, beating the rhythm of her song along the fence as she goes. Then she decides to forge her own path behind the family's house, and finds some blue flowers which are strange to her. Picking an armful of the flowers as well as sprigs from other flowers she finds, she returns home at twelve o'clock, having sensed that the area she had walked to was not as pleasant as the usual places she walks to.

On her way home, she steps into the eye sockets of a skull lying on the ground. She realizes that she's come across the skeleton of a man who had been hanged from the nearby oak tree many years ago. His head is lying next to his body and the remains of the noose used to hang him are lying nearby, with vestiges of the rope still hanging from a branch of the tree. The story ends with Myop laying down her flowers and the third-person narrator announcing that the summer was over.

## Analysis

Although 'The Flowers' runs to just a couple of pages, Alice Walker manages to build an extraordinary amount of power into the few paragraphs of her story, which uses symbolism to show, rather than tell, the emotional response Myop has to her discovery. This is a story about lost innocence, and in many ways a coming-of-age story, but it is also, of course, about the dark history of racism in the United States.

The narrator doesn't tell us that the man whose skeleton Myop discovers was African-American, because such a detail doesn't need to be openly stated: the history of lynchings in America tell the story for us.

The contrast between Myop's happy-go-lucky mood at the beginning of 'The Flowers' and her very different mood by the end of the story, following her gruesome discovery, is handled without sentimentality or overstatement on Walker's part. It's true that Myop begins the story skipping lightly, with 'excited' tremors in her face, and singing and beating her stick in time to the tune. She is happy and blissfully unaware of the grim reality of America's recent past, despite being herself African-American (note Walker's description of her hand as dark brown).



Her discovery of the skeleton changes that, but note how she regards the remains of the body with 'interest' rather than, say, sadness or shocked horror. She is described as *gazing*, which suggests intentness and fascination, but not necessarily of the shocked kind.

We cannot even be sure that she intends the laying down of the flowers to be interpreted as a symbol of respect, in the way mourners put flowers on the graves of loved ones.

And yet the fact that she does not drop the flowers but carefully lays them down certainly suggests a kind of awed reverence for the man and the grim fate to which he was subjected. It's clear she has pieced together what happened to him when she examines the spot and finds the remains of the noose on the branch of the tree.

It's also obvious that the final words of the story reflect Myop's loss of innocence, rather than just the end of the season: the summer really is over, and there will be no more days of 'golden surprise' for her, or at least none that will gleam quite so brightly.

Myop's name, which suggests *myopia* or short-sightedness, is intended to convey her imperfect child's-eye view of the world around her. And yet it is unclear how *much* she has now understood. We as readers can deduce in seconds that the man was African-American and that's why he was lynched from the oak tree.

But can a ten-year-old girl, even a girl whose family have faced the same kind of prejudice? Or has she understood the history of racism in the South, but before it has only existed in the abstract for her, whereas now the awful and unavoidable reality has been brought home, almost literally on her doorstep? The fact that the nine paragraphs of 'The Flowers' can prompt these questions, and can carry such force even while Walker resists the temptation to hammer home her 'message' or sentimentalise the situation, is a testament to the writing, the careful use of symbolism, and the subtle way in which Walker enacts a shift from blissful innocence in the first half of the story towards a kind of epiphany in the closing paragraphs of the story.

Thematically, Walker uses The Beauty of the Natural World to build toward the exposure of Lynchings and Racial Violence Against African Americans. Through social commentary on racism, Walker explores Coming of Age: The Loss of Innocence, a byproduct of racial violence. To demonstrate the blossoming of social awareness, "The Flowers" enacts the process in which the protagonist comes of age.

Walker uses whimsical imagery and upbeat diction to characterize Myop's wide-eyed naivete and set an idyllic mood. Like Myop's worldview, the imagery and mood darken as Myop's journey into the unknown woods progresses. The story opens with Myop skipping happily around her family's cabin and concludes with the child laying down her flowers, which symbolize her innocence and optimism. Myop exchanges her naiveite for a sober-mindedness more characteristic of adulthood.

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