

1 Where Life and Art Intersect

Born into a sharecropping family in Georgia, Alice Walker is one of the best-known African American writers alive today. “As I remember it,” Walker has said, “we were really not allowed to be discouraged. Discouragement couldn’t hold out against my mother’s faith.” Empowered by her mother’s faith, Walker dedicated her life to exploring—through both her writing and her activism—the lives of black women.

Childhood

The youngest of eight children, Alice Walker was a precocious child. Her mother enrolled her in first grade at the age of four, and Walker demonstrated from the very start a love for reading and a flair for writing. Realizing that her rambunctious older brothers were likely to find and destroy anything she committed to paper, the fledgling author composed poems in her head. This early training in creation influences her habits to this day. Walker has said that she plots her novels in visions that fill her head for a long period of time and then transfers them almost word perfect to a yellow pad. “When I’m ready to put it on paper that’s pretty much the way it will be” (Whitaker 90).

Two of these rambunctious brothers almost blinded her. The children had been playing cowboys and Indians when a BB from one of the brothers’ guns hit Walker in the eye. In “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self,” Walker recounts the incident:

I am eight years old and a tomboy. I have a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, checkered shirt and pants, all red. My playmates are my brothers, two and four years older than I. Their colors are black and green, the only difference in the way we are dressed. . . . We chase each other for hours rustling cattle, being outlaws, delivering damsels from distress. Then my parents decide to buy my brothers guns. These are not “real” guns. They shoot “BBs.” Copper pellets my brothers say will kill birds. Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly I am relegated to the position of Indian. Now there appears a great distance between us. (*In Search* 363)

The boys begged Walker not to tell their parents what had happened, and as a result a week went by before she saw a doctor. His words would haunt Walker for years, “Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too.”

Mining this experience for meaning—something at which she is a master—Walker describes how the fear that she might lose her sight has caused her to dash about the world hungrily, even desperately, storing up visual images. In her poem “I Said to Poetry,” the speaker, fed up with writing, holds a grudging conversation with her muse. In an effort to get the reluctant writer to take up her pen once more, the muse reminds her, “You remember / the desert, and how glad you were / that you have an eye / to see it with?” (*Her Blue Body* 353).

Adolescence

Along with the fear of losing her sight, the accident left Walker feeling disfigured. Scar tissue had formed over the damaged eye, and, with typical childhood brutality, classmates tormented her. The confident little girl who once loved to perform suddenly became withdrawn and shy. Walker turned to books.

I am twelve. When relatives come to visit I hide in my room. My cousin Brenda, just my age, whose father works in the post office and whose mother is a nurse, comes to find me. “Hello,” she says. And then she asks, looking at my recent school picture which I did not want taken, and on which the “glob,” as I think of it, is clearly visible, “You still can’t see out of that eye?”

“No,” I say, and flop back on the bed over my book.

That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty. (*In Search* 366)

Over time Walker came to terms with the “glob.” Though the scar tissue was eventually removed through surgery, the themes of vulnerability, inner versus outer beauty, and a celebration of the natural world continue to inspire Alice Walker’s writing to this day.

College

Ironically, the accident that caused Walker to lose the sight of an eye, helped open the door for her to college, with support from the Georgia Department of Rehabilitation. The department offered financial assistance to physically challenged students. Alice received free textbooks and half her college tuition. Eager to enroll such a promising student, Spelman College presented her with an academic scholarship for the other half. The women in Walker’s church raised another seventy-five dollars, and Alice was on her way.

It was at Spelman that Alice became involved in political activism. In 1962, she picketed the White House over the Cuban Missile Crisis and during the summer that followed her freshman year was chosen to attend the World Youth Peace Festival in Helsinki. Returning to Atlanta, Walker became involved in civil

rights demonstrations organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These were heady days for a bright young woman keen to know the world and to fight for social justice. The following summer, Walker participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was there that she heard Martin Luther King deliver the “I Have a Dream” speech.

After her sophomore year, Walker began to feel constrained at Spelman, an all-black college whose student body was made up of mostly middle and upper middle-class African American young women. Another scholarship opportunity allowed Walker to transfer to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, where she felt that she had more intellectual freedom as well as more support for her writing. In this new environment, she was one of only six African American students in the entire college.

It was at Sarah Lawrence that Walker began to write poetry in earnest. Every morning she took the poems she had written the day before and slid them under the door of her teacher, the extraordinary poet, Muriel Rukeyser. Rukeyser was impressed and showed the poems to her agent. Was it chance or the goddess of poetry that placed these two in such close proximity? I like to think that they were drawn to each other. Through Rukeyser’s intervention, the collection *Once*, which includes many poems describing Walker’s experiences during the civil rights movement (“Once,” “Chic Freedom’s Reflection,” “Hymn”), was published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

The Civil Rights Movement

After graduation, Walker fell in love with a white civil rights lawyer, Mel Leventhal, and moved with him to Mississippi. This act, in itself, was a form of protest because the state had passed a law forbidding interracial couples from living together. Though the

law was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, Walker and Leventhal lived in fear of reprisals from angry neighbors. Within this climate of racial tension, Walker continued to write, and her very first published essay, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” won first prize in the *American Scholar* contest. Walker also wanted to write about the Southern black women she was getting to know and coming to love. In a letter to a friend, Walker wrote that she would be staying in Mississippi for a while because “the stories are knee-deep” (*In Search* 224). In 1969, Walker gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca, and to her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

Knee-Deep in Stories

To begin a series of lessons on Alice Walker’s short story collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, I took my cue from the author, asking my class of tenth graders to think about a time when they felt they were “knee-deep in stories.”

RONNIE: Anybody want to come with me to my grandpa’s tonight?
 You’ll be knee-deep in something alright. Sometimes I feel like he’s stuffing my head with stories about the good old days.

SALIMA: He probably just wants you to know what it was like back then or to know something about him. My grandmother is always telling me stories about how it was in Iran before our family had to leave. I don’t remember any of what happened, so I guess it’s her way of reminding me of where I come from.

Ms. JAGO: How do you feel when she’s telling these stories?

SALIMA: A lot of times I’m just thinking about the homework I should be doing but sometimes the stories are pretty good. I like when she talks about what my dad was like as a little boy.

PEDRO: Yeh, those are good ones because then you can use them when your dad gets mad about you doing something wrong. But the stories I really like are the ones I hear when nobody thinks I'm listening. All the adults will just be sitting around late and they forget I'm still in the room and they just talk and talk and talk.

MS. JAGO: I think that's the kind of listening Alice Walker did when she was working among working-class black women in Mississippi. She was hired to teach African American history, but the students came from such diverse educational backgrounds that Walker wasn't sure where to begin. She decided to have the women begin by telling their own histories. These true stories were the seeds for Walker's short-story collection *In Love and Trouble*.

The Stories

Divide the class into five groups of students and give each group copies of one story from *In Love and Trouble*:

“Roselily”

This story juxtaposes the traditional lines from a marriage ceremony with the internal monologue of a young woman, already the mother of four, who, in hopes of a better life, is getting married and moving to the North.

“Everyday Use”

The narrator is the mother of two daughters, one an outspoken, educated, modern young woman; the other, a reclusive homebody who as a child was injured badly in a fire. When Dee comes to visit and claims the family quilts for her own, the mother must

choose between Dee’s desire for the quilts as valuable heirlooms and pieces of art and Maggie’s “everyday use” for them. This story is widely recognized as one of Walker’s very best. It appears in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.

“The Welcome Table”

In this beautifully simple story, Walker writes about an elderly black woman who is thrown out of a white church where she has come to pray. Walking away from the church, she meets Jesus on the road. Much is said in this story in very few words. If one of your groups of students is made up of slow readers, this is the ideal choice for them.

“Strong Horse Tea”

In this heartbreaking story of a young woman with a sick child, the mother does not want to resort to home remedies to cure her baby. Having asked the white mailman to bring the white doctor, she waits. To no one’s surprise but her own, only her neighbor, an old woman with magic leaves around her neck, comes to her aid.

“To Hell with Dying”

Based on a real person in Alice Walker’s life, Mr. Sweet—a diabetic, alcoholic, guitar player—is periodically brought back from the brink of death by the children who love him. This was Walker’s first published short story. Muriel Rukeyser sent it to Langston Hughes who published it in *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*. In an essay titled “The Old Artist,” Walker writes:

When I met Langston Hughes I was amazed. He was another Mr. Sweet? Aging and battered, full of pain, but writing poetry, and laughing, too, and always making other people feel better.

It was as if my love for one great old man down in the poor and beautiful and simple South had magically, in the new world of college and literature and poets and publishing and New York, led me to another. (*Living by the Word* 40)

In 1988, the story “To Hell with Dying” was published as a children’s picture book.

The Assignment

Each student group is responsible for presenting its story to the class in a manner that would make others interested in reading it. In the presentation students should be warned not to give away details that might spoil someone else’s reading of the story but to offer enough information to pique a reader’s interest. Each student is also responsible for turning in a reading log containing five to seven quotations from the story with accompanying reflections based on these quotes. Following the group presentations, students choose a second Alice Walker story to read. As a culminating activity, students write a short essay exploring their responses to Walker’s short fiction.

A Metacognitive Moment

I believe it is important to let students know right from the start where an assignment is heading. Though some may feel a bit overwhelmed when they hear how much work they are going to be expected to do over the next few days, this feeling is counterbalanced by the sense that each individual classroom activity is leading to a larger goal. Too often, I watch instruction become fragmented and see students dutifully performing a series of seemingly unrelated tasks without any idea how one is linked to the next. Reminding students at every step of the lesson’s goal—in

this case, to understand and appreciate Alice Walker's short fiction—gives our work together a sense of wholeness. The following stories are collected in her anthology *In Love and Trouble*.

Sample Student Reading Logs

Ronnie Nunez From "The Welcome Table"

QUOTATION: "Auntie, you know this is not your church" (83).

RESPONSE: This is ironic because there is not supposed to be this kind of discrimination in the house of God. How could it not be the old lady's church? It shows how though the white people are pretending to be polite they are really discriminating against her for being black and poor.

Kara Greenspan From "Everyday Use"

QUOTATION: "You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said. And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it" (59).

RESPONSE: I think what's happening here is that the author is showing how it's actually Dee who doesn't have a clue about what heritage really means. She's got her head all stuck up in the clouds and doesn't see what special people her mom and sister really are. If something doesn't fit in a picture frame or

on the pages of a book, she can't see it. Smart as she is, she doesn't really understand much.

Salima Ladak From "Strong Horse Tea"

QUOTATION: ". . . the frail breathing had stopped with the thunder, not to come again" (97).

RESPONSE: At first I didn't get it that this meant the baby had died but now I see that it does (Joe helped me with that). I think it's really sad because the mother will do anything to make her baby well again, but nothing can save him. I'm not sure I like stories that have endings like this one. Too depressing. That mailman should have told the doctor to come and help.

The Essay

After students have read two or three stories from *In Love and Trouble*, I ask them to formulate their ideas into an essay. I think student essayists should work in the style of Michel de Montaigne. Fed up with sixteenth-century discourse, Montaigne experimented with a new form of personal writing. He knew that what he was creating fit no traditional category, so he simply called what he produced *essays*—meaning attempts, or trials, or experiments. I want my students' essays to be experiments in thinking.

In his introduction to *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein describes the essay as a form of discovery.

I sometimes make notes recalling anecdotes, facts, oddities of one kind or another that I wish to include in an essay, but where precisely in the essay they will be used I cannot say in advance. As for a previous design or ultimate goal for my es-

says, before I write them I have neither. The personal essay is, in my experience, a form of discovery. What one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one's feelings, instincts, thoughts in the crucible of composition. (15)

I love that phrase: “the crucible of composition.” Clearly, student writers need more guidance and structure than an accomplished essayist such as Epstein; I fear, however, that if we nail students to an artificial structure—the five-paragraph essay, for example—they will never know the intellectual joy of discovering what they think as they write. I am not suggesting that we allow students to turn in a stream-of-consciousness composition. Good writing is always carefully crafted. The best writing, however, is also inspired.

Often, I have students construct their own focus questions for their essays. On other occasions I offer them prompts. In any case, I always provide students with choices. The following essay questions have resulted in interesting student essays about *In Love and Trouble*:

1. Alice Walker was inspired to write these fictional short stories by the true stories that were told to her by Southern black women. Explain how Walker's made-up stories honor the deeper truths of these women's lives.
2. What themes do these stories seem to have in common? In your opinion, what does Walker seem to be saying about the people whose lives she portrays in the collection? Does the author seem sympathetic or critical, detached or involved?
3. Why do you think Walker called this collection *In Love and Trouble*? Please be very specific in describing how individual characters

find themselves in love and in trouble and how they deal with the love and trouble.

Assessment

After months of deliberation and countless hours of consensus building, the English department at my high school has adopted a rubric for evaluating student essays. I offer it here not as an example of how things should be done but rather as a draft from which teachers at your school might work. Our goal was to move toward holding students to common expectations across teachers and across grade levels. This rubric borrows from many published rubrics that have gone before. It is not perfect but does reflect our best intentions. If you would like an electronic copy, the rubric can be found on our English department Web site at <http://english.samohi.org/>.

Santa Monica High School English Department Analytical Essay Scoring Guide, Grades 9–12

A 6 paper presents an insightful analysis of the text, elaborating with well-chosen examples and persuasive reasoning. It has mature development and style. The 6 paper shows that its writer can use a variety of sophisticated sentences effectively, observe the conventions of written English, and choose words aptly.

A 5 paper presents a thoughtful and well-organized analysis of the text, elaborating with appropriate examples and sensible reasoning. It may contain minor errors of fact or interpretation. A 5 paper typically has a less fluent and complex style than a 6, but does show that its writer can vary sentences effectively, observe the conventions of written English, and usually choose words aptly.

A 4 paper presents an adequate analysis of the text, elaborating with sufficient examples and acceptable reasoning. It may contain some errors of fact or interpretation. Just as these examples and this reasoning will ordinarily be less developed than those in 5 papers, so will the 4 paper's style be less effective. Nevertheless, a 4 paper shows that its writer can usually control sentences of reasonable variety, observe the conventions of written English, and choose words of sufficient precision.

A 3 paper demonstrates some understanding of the text and prompt, but relevant analysis is minimal or absent. It may substantially misread or oversimplify the text. The paper may rely on plot summary, inappropriate or insufficient evidence, or move directly from evidence to inference. Its prose is usually characterized by at least one of the following: frequently imprecise word choice; little sentence variety; occasional major errors in grammar and usage, or frequent minor errors.

A 2 paper has serious weaknesses, ordinarily of several kinds. It frequently presents a simplistic or incoherent response, one that may suggest a major misunderstanding of the text or the prompt. It lacks specific evidence. Its prose is usually characterized by at least one of the following: simplistic or inaccurate word choice; monotonous or fragmented sentence structure; many repeated errors in grammar and usage.

A 1 paper suggests severe difficulties in reading and writing conventional English. It may disregard the prompt's demands, or it may lack any appropriate pattern of structure or development. It

may be inappropriately brief. It often has a pervasive pattern of errors in word choice, sentence structure, grammar, and usage.

Without a doubt, the most valuable outcome of producing this rubric was the series of intense conversations about student writing that creating it entailed.

Potential Minefields

It would be remiss of me not to warn you that certain Alice Walker stories have been criticized as inappropriate for teenager's eyes. When "Roselily" appeared on a California statewide assessment, it drew criticism from those who felt that the story's main character, an unmarried mother of four, was morally reprehensible. Squeamish readers may be upset by "Strong Horse Tea." Although horse urine is a well-known folk remedy, they find the thought of drinking such medicine revolting.

Some students may object to the fact that white people are often the "bad guys" in Walker's stories, for example, in "The Welcome Table," where the pious white worshipers eject the old black woman from their church. What is important when students voice this criticism of Walker's writing is to ask them to consider the context of the stories. Is she stereotyping white mailmen when she has this character in "Strong Horse Tea" ignore the mother's plea for a doctor, or is Walker depicting one particularly callous individual who is also white? Was such behavior on the part of whites acceptable in the South at the time the story takes place? Ask students if they have ever felt they were discriminated against simply for being a teenager. This question never fails to bring out all kinds of horror stories about treatment from store detectives in the mall or about being ticketed for rolling through

a stop sign by local police. How might their interpretation of the story shift if they, like many of Walker's characters, lived in a society that took for granted their second-class status?

I will be discussing the issue of censorship and self-censorship in greater detail within the context of Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. Here, I offer a single caveat: read every story before you assign it. One reason some teachers cling to textbook anthologies is that they know the stories that appear have passed a publisher's scrutiny for offensive language or subject matter. Trust your own judgment and your knowledge of your students and what is right for them; do not let yourself be blindsided. No one who has survived a censorship challenge would choose to repeat the experience.