

Taking Innocence from the Innocent

“The Flowers” by Alice Walker is an eye-opening story regarding the coming of age, and loss of innocence of a ten year old girl named Myop. The story takes the reader on a journey through Myop’s day where her racial birthmark leads to her loss of innocence, therefore altering her life forever. This story was written following the abolition of slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Despite the end to legal slavery, violence against African-Americans was still extremely prevalent, and this short story demonstrates the lasting effects this has on African-Americans who never experienced slavery first hand. Myop is forced into adulthood when she finds the corpse of a lynched African-American man, and this ends her childhood. She is catapulted into the painful truth regarding the past of her ancestors, and she cannot live the carefree life a ten year old should live. “The Flowers” by Alice Walker portrays Myop as a carefree child who is forced into accepting the truth of her past, and leaves the reader with the inquiry regarding if Myop will allow this experience to affect her in a positive or negative way.

The story begins with Myop “skipping lightly” and “the days had never been as beautiful as these” which implies she is happy and enthusiastic to begin her day (Walker 1). There are subtle illusions to the past of slavery through “the harvesting of the corn and cotton” because slaves typically worked in the fields picking cotton (Walker 1). Another illusion is Myop’s family being a family of sharecroppers because it is a direct outcome of the abolition of slavery. Sharecropping is the equivalent of slavery, but it is legal. These are clues that a reader typically would not notice, but once the story unfolds it becomes clearer why these word choices are used by Walker. As Myop begins her journey she is singing and “nothing exists for her but her song,” which demonstrates how unprepared Myop is for the horror she is about to find (Walker 1).

Myop begins as an innocent girl who is naïve to her surroundings, and this could be related to her name. It is short for “myopia,” which is a term used to describe near-sightedness. At such a young age, Myop is unable to see the effects of slavery because it is an abstract concept she has not experienced. She is living in the present without any concern for the past, and this is why she loses her innocence so quickly. The abrupt realization that her ancestors’ past still has an effect on her life forces her to abandon her innocence. She quickly loses this innocence during an event as simple as a walk through the woods. She begins exploring a new part of the woods she has not been to before, and “makes her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes” because she is not worried about any negative consequences that could arise from this walk (Walker 1). The use of the word “bouncing” to describe the way in which Myop is walking demonstrates her carefree nature, and emphasizes that she is not anticipating the horror she will find shortly.

She continues on her walk and finds herself a mile away from her home before she makes the decision to start her journey home. The path she takes leads her to a place where “the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts” and the use of the words “strangeness” and “haunts” both have negative connotations in this context (Walker 1). The use of the word “strangeness” shows the land is obviously unfamiliar and not an area she would typically walk through. The use of the word “haunts” has a double meaning in this context because it could literally mean an area someone usually spends their time at or it could be symbolic of the event she is about to experience that will “haunt” her for life. She ended this part of her journey in a cove, which is gloomy. The land is described as “strange,” and “the air was damp, the silence close and deep” which foreshadows this area is not fit for a ten year old child (Walker 1). Myop is far from her home, and this makes her vulnerable to her surroundings.

As she attempts to return to “the peacefulness of the morning,” Myop encounters a situation she is not anticipating. She stumbles upon the body of a lynched African-American man, and “her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose,” but Myop does not realize immediately she stepped on the corpse of a human being (Walker 1). The use of the phrase “her heel became lodged” is symbolic of Myop’s connection to slavery

because she is lodged into facing the brutal past of slavery as opposed to living the carefree life of a typical ten year old. She is unafraid to free herself from the ridge, but yelps when she makes the connection that she her foot is stuck in the skull of a human. Myop loses her innocence in this moment because she is literally and symbolically being forced to face the past of her ancestors. She is staring at the corpse of man who was lynched because of his skin color; the same skin color Myop has.

As Myop studies the body she notices that all of his teeth had been either cracked or broken, and this demonstrates how African-Americans were abused prior to their death. His head was lying beside his body, and there were remains of a noose near the body. The remaining portion was hanging on a tree, and this information gives the depiction of an African-American being hung because a noose is a type of knot at the end of a rope used to hang a human. Without this piece of information, it would be nearly impossible to conclude the man was hung. This realization that unfair treatment of African-Americans still occurs forces Myop to lose her innocence and enter the world of adulthood. She must abandon the mindset of a child and accept her past.

Before Myop leaves the scene, “Instinctively, the little girl lays down her flowers in homage, as if putting the dead to rest” (Loeb 61). The description of how the man is found gives an excellent portrayal of how African-Americans were seen in society. The man is killed and left to decompose without a proper funeral, and this shows that whites viewed blacks as disposable, unworthy, and like trash. He has been left in the woods for such a long duration of time that “all of his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls” and this speaks volumes to the lack of remorse the people who killed him feel. The people who killed this man did not have the decency to give him a funeral, or even bury him because they view him as inferior due to an aspect as trivial as race. Not one of them feels any remorse following his death and return to properly bury him, which demonstrates how African-Americans are not valued as people. Myop does not feel this way, and takes it upon herself to put him to rest through her own funeral by lying down the flowers she has collected during her walk.

This story ends with the simple statement, “And the summer was over” because summer is associated with innocence, and a time for children to enjoy their time filled with leisure activities (Walker 2). Myop’s summer is over because her mind is now preoccupied with the image of the man she finds, and her newfound knowledge regarding her ancestors and their unfair treatment. She is no longer “...in her safe, protected world of childhood” because she has been exposed to the evils of the world (Loeb 61). Her entire life is altered by this event, and she will never be able to grow without this engrained in her. She can either use this experience to mold her into a stronger person, or use it to treat whites the way African-Americans have been treated in the past.

Myop is the victim in this story, but the way in which she reacts to this situation is what will truly determine how much of a victim she truly is. The reader does not know how Myop will react, but she could react in two polar opposite ways. Myop could take the high road, and allow this situation to mold her into a strong woman who embraces her birthmark with pride, or she could become resentful and treat whites unfairly because of how their ancestors acted. If she chooses the latter, Myop becomes a victimizer herself because she is unable to rationalize that not all whites are responsible for slavery and the unfair treatment of African-Americans. She may limit her interactions with white people because of her belief they are evil, and this would be a disadvantage for her because she could miss out on some valuable relationships because of her inability to see past skin color. Martin Luther King Jr. believed “Judging someone by race or skin color is racism, and moving toward judging someone only by their demonstrated character is the cure for racism” (Campbell 389). This idea needs to be adopted by people of all races to cure racism and ensure no race will be discriminated against. This should be the viewpoint Myop has if she wants to better herself and not fall victim to victimizing innocent people. Her decision is not an easy one, but if she cannot come to terms with the concept that not all whites are “innately evil” she could become just as horrendous as the men and women who owned and mistreated their slaves. She, similar to all African-Americans, is responsible for how she responds to the previous acts against African-Americans along with the current issues that currently exist (Burrow 236). Myop must overcome the desire to seek retaliation or make generalizations about a

larger population based on a select group.

While Myop begins her journey as an innocent child, this is quickly altered when she discovers the body of a lynched African-American man. Her entire world is flipped upside down, and she must find a way to rationalize this event in her mind. She is thrown into the uncensored world at such a young age, and this will have a drastic effect on her life. She is now exposed to the evils of slavery and the lasting effects it has on future generations. She can either use her racial “birthmark” as a strength to aid her in becoming a better person, or she can allow this to set her back in life. The decision is Myop’s, but Walker does not inform the reader of her decision.

Works Cited

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