

## VIOLENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF INNOCENCE: REFLECTIONS ON ALICE WALKER'S "THE FLOWERS"<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

We live in a world in which both virtual and actual violence are capitalized on as sources of entertainment, in which the media is so saturated with violence that we need it to offer us ever-increasing doses of the latter so that we can exit our state of moral numbness and react, in which even the most horrific acts of violence leave most of us passive, since we regard them as nothing more than signs of our troubled times. Consequently, both recognizing and taking a stand against the subtle forms in which violence manifests itself have, unfortunately, become real challenges. As a result, I chose as starting-point for the present paper Alice Walker's "The Flowers", a literary piece in which violence is not presented overtly, but only suggested, and not experienced, but witnessed, and only through its unfortunate outcome – death.

The present paper follows Myop's transition from the state of innocence to that of awareness, dwelling on the powerful imagery of the story, and discusses the effects of witnessing violence or its outcomes upon young minds.

**Keywords:** *violence, death, innocence, intolerance, rite of passage*

### **1. Motivation**

Margaret J. Wheatley accurately points out that "these days, our senses are bombarded with aggression. We are constantly confronted with global images of unending, escalating war and violence." (182) As it happens each time, our senses are exposed to the constant action of a certain stimulus over a considerable period of time, and we have reached a comfortable state of

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adaptation. It is a dangerous state, for violence encompasses so many types of deviant human behavior, many more than those we usually associate with it:

Violence is not merely killing another. It is violence when we use a sharp word, when we make a gesture to brush away a person, when we obey because there is fear. So violence isn't merely organized butchery in the name of God, in the name of society or country. Violence is much more subtle, much deeper, and we are inquiring into the very depths of violence. (Krishnamurti 94)

Violence can be physical, verbal or psychological; it can be self-inflicted or brought onto those around us; it can remain at the mental level or we can decide to act upon it; it can disguise itself as justice or love. It can pass for normality.

Perversely sophisticated as it is, violence has generated multiple literary and cinematographic representations, each attempting to capture one of its many facets. There are numerous such works that have managed to make my mind and my soul resonate throughout time and, apart from this, too much freedom of choice does prove problematic sometimes. Given my interest in portrayals of less conspicuous forms of violence, however, I chose as starting-point for the present paper a literary piece in which the depiction of violence diverts from the predictable path, so often threaded by writers too eager to become memorable. Thus, in “The Flowers,” violence is not presented overtly, but only suggested, and not experienced, but witnessed, and only through its unfortunate outcome – death. Moreover, the witness in question is a child, and the brutality in the story springs out of racial hatred, two aspects which render violence in “The Flowers” even more impacting.

In the concentrated space of only two pages charged with symbolism, in which, as in the case of a well-crafted poem, no word is superfluous, Alice Walker depicts the abrupt (thus, one might say, violent) coming-of-age of a little girl named Myop (a bizarre name, even for people with a propensity for names rich in connotations, pointing to her lack of insight on the outside world), who stumbles upon the decayed corpse of a lynched man while happily gathering flowers in the woods on a summer day. In spite of her efforts to cling to the innocence of her childhood, Myop finds herself relating to the tormented history of her race, for, despite the most likely intentional vagueness of the story in terms of the background of the characters (if such a term may also be applied to a corpse), a vagueness which renders the message universal (as in the case of all good literature), there are several clues pointing out to the African-American ethnicity of the former and their socio-economic status as sharecroppers in the mid-twentieth century rural South. It is a child's rite of passage into the grim reality of adulthood, an initiation into a world where there is no place for flowers and song under the warm summer sky, but only for intolerance and bloodshed. It

is a story about the heritage of violence we pass down to our children, as beautifully-written as it is shocking.

The present paper follows Myop's transition from the state of innocence to that of awareness, dwelling on the powerful imagery of the story, and discusses the effects of witnessing violence or its outcomes upon young minds, for "The Flowers" deals with both a wounded body and a wounded mind.

## 2. Critical Analysis

At the beginning of the short-story, Myop appears as the epitome of the carefree child: caressed by the rays of the sun, delighted by the rich fragrances and the mild sounds in the air, surrounded by the dearly familiar, she is enjoying yet another pleasurable, slowly-flowing summer day in her sheltered young life:

It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws. (Dungy 147)

She may be the daughter of sharecroppers most likely struggling with poverty, but children find joy in the simplest things and they need very little to be happy:

Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. 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. (Dungy 147)

At first nothing seems to suggest that today's exploration of the woods behind Myop's house would be any different from all her previous unaccompanied walks. Nothing seems to foreshadow an ending that would contrast deeply with this elaborately harmonious beginning. Yet, this time, Myop ventures into an area of the forest that she had never wandered into before, with the dangerously naïve audacity of the child that has not yet witnessed or experienced evil: "Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes." (Dungy 147) Despite the warnings that she had probably received from her parents about the dangers lurking among the seemingly benign trees and flowers, her attitude does not become defensive as she advances into the woods; what she displays is merely mild vigilance. However, the very mention of the word "snakes," alluding to the idea of evil hidden in the garden, manages to arouse the readers' attention as to a change that will unavoidable occur, disrupting the peacefulness of the walk.

Myop's subsequent discovery of the "armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges" (Dungy 147) among "various common but pretty ferns and leaves" (Dungy 147) will only manage to confirm what their intuition had whispered to trained readers: the familiar and the idyllic will soon give way to the unknown and the horrific.

Indeed, the shift is almost instant: "It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep." (Dungy 147) The landscape itself seems to anticipate a new discovery; this time, however, it is not one which Myop can add to her bouquet of flowers and leaves. The child senses that she is not safe and starts heading back, but this attempt at prolonging her state of innocence proves to be in vain, for, unexpectedly, she steps into the hollows of what used to be a man's eyes. The "little yelp of surprise" (Dungy 148) that comes out of her mouth when, reaching down to free her trapped foot, she notices the "naked grin" (Dungy 148) of the skeleton, is doubled by a similar one coming from the readers. If there is something that one does not expect when starting to read about a girl's Little Red Riding Hood-like flower-picking expedition through the woods, as skeptical a reader as one may be when it comes to such unrealistically optimistic topics, that is, beyond all doubt, her stumbling upon the decayed body of the victim of a lynching.

Although seemingly strange, Myop's attitude towards her discovery is quite typical for a child. Children are inquisitive by nature and, apart from this, they have not been scarred or corrupted in any way, as adults have, therefore they often exhibit mere curiosity in situations that arouse fear or disgust in adults. As a result, Myop neither runs towards her home, nor screams for help, both the expected instinctive reactions when encountering such gruesome sights. Instead, she merely starts studying the remains of the dead man, puzzled by his presence in what she had always perceived as familiar territory, as the setting for her safe childhood adventures. What is more, she clears away the dirt and the leaves that were covering the skeleton in order to have a better look – an understandable reaction, given the fact that for children death is as intriguing as any other fact of life, and Myop might have encountered it already, albeit in a different form. Death is not what Myop is forced to face directly for the first time in her life: the harsh reality of racism and of the abominable actions it fuels is.

Thus, judging by the decayed overalls, Myop discovers that, like her parents, the man whose bones covered by rotten pieces of cloth lay in front of her had probably been a sharecropper. In the vicinity of the skeleton, however, the little girl spots a wild pink rose. As she was preparing to add it to her bundle, next to the strange blue flowers she had previously stumbled upon, she discovers, however, that what had fed its growth had been the decay of a noose whose other end she spots hanging from a large oak nearby. The revelation is, again, instant: Myop lays down her flowers, both as an act of pious homage towards one of her own, and as a result of her understanding that they no longer

had a place in her arms. It seems a voluntary gesture, but it is, in fact, forcefully triggered by circumstances: once she realizes that the man had suffered the violent death reserved by whites to those who shared her skin color, and is, thus, forced to identify with him and potentially envisage a similar fate for herself or her loved ones, she can no longer be the light-hearted child she was at the beginning of her walk through the woods. Indeed, she does not know what the man's executioners had determined to have been his fault: an assertion of his race, instead of an apology, or maybe the mere offensive display of a dark body. Nor does she have any time to wonder before the painful epiphany occurs. Nevertheless, independent of her will, along with the summer, Myop's childhood ends, as abruptly as the short-story itself.

She receives vision, but it comes at a dear price, as does the concomitant revelation of death and sexuality in an equally striking American short-story, also centered on the initiation of a little girl, namely Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave." It does not seem a coincidence that the names of the two protagonists, one African-American and one white, are linked to the idea of vision, or that both stories are set in the South, which, through slavery and its legacy, racism, is in itself a site of great violence. Another element which links the two stories is the powerful imagery they are built upon, which counterbalances their simple plots. In "The Grave," the shocking image is that of the bloody sack with the unborn babies of a freshly-killed rabbit that the subject of the initiation, Miranda, is pushed by curiosity to see, to her immediate regret. In "The Flowers," Alice Walker requires only two pages to write a story whose imagery will virtually haunt the readers much after they have laid the book down. The mental sight of a ten-year-old girl carrying a large colorful bouquet, hunched over a skeleton, with the frayed end of a rope hanging from a nearby tree, in a clearing in the woods, will undoubtedly remain engraved in their minds. So will the visualization of the pink rose nurtured by the rich remains of the victim of a lynching, an image that is particularly grotesque and, as a result, particularly inspired. Thus, it twists that comforting idea of the unending natural cycle of life and death which the dead body is a part of, an idea expressed, for instance, by Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch, author of the famous painting *The Scream*, and shared by so many: "From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity." (Porter 27) Moreover, the rose, a conventional symbol of beauty, disturbingly suggests that the latter can arise from brutality – roses can, after all, both charm with their velvety petals, and do harm, through their thorns.

The fact that the rose is not red, the color normally associated with blood and, thus, with murder, but pink, the less aggressive form of red, diluted as it is with the white of purity, and, at the same time, the color which is conventionally associated with the freshness of a little girl, is in itself an inspired decision from Alice Walker, adding as it does to the grotesqueness that plays such an important

role in the text. A red rose would have been much too conspicuous, and the entire story is built on allusion. Given Walker's commitment to subtlety in "The Flowers," the violence is just like the rope hanging from the oak: "Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled – barely there – but spinning restlessly in the breeze." (Dungy 148) Nothing is overtly presented, everything is merely implied, yet nothing is left unsaid, which makes the story ten times more striking than if Alice Walker had taken the readers by the hand and carried them through. Even the title, which always triggers a set of expectations in the readers, is cleverly misleading, since it seems to anticipate the most benign story possible. Only after reading does one grasp the connotations of the strange blue flowers and the pink rose and understand the special place they occupy in the story.

Thus, if the blue flowers represent Myop's innocence, which she is not prepared to relinquish, the pink rose symbolizes her untimely revelation of racism. The title's emphasis on the flowers, rather than on the lynching itself, is a literary artifice which enables Alice Walker to convince the readers to enter the world of the story with their guard lowered, and to follow Myop through the woods with their hearts as light as hers, so that the moment of the bitter epiphany be, through the unavoidable identification with the little girl, which is simultaneous to her own identification with the murdered man, equally striking for them as well. At the end of the story, however, after they have had a minute to compose themselves and reach that detachment without which one would be unable to derive any pleasure from art dealing with the ugly, the readers are far from feeling tricked; what they feel, instead, is admiration for a gifted author and gratitude for an intensified aesthetic experience.

What adds to the powerful subtlety of the story is the fact that Myop does not witness the actual execution, but only its aftermath. Given the fact that she, as author, exerts absolute control over the universe of the short-story we later choose to enter, Alice Walker could have chosen to have Myop directly observe the lynching one night when darkness takes her by surprise in the middle of the woods, or even discover the freshly-lynched body hanging from the oak in the middle of the cove. What is more, she could have had the lynched man be a close relation of Myop's, such as a father or a brother, in virtue of a stronger identification which, in fact, does not prove necessary. Yet, just as she does not extend *The Flowers* beyond the length of a sketch or burden it with any auctorial intrusion, Alice Walker does not establish a blood tie or any direct connection between the little girl and the man whose remains she finds in the forest. This way, the socio-moral message, directed against racism, in general, and the legacy of violence that we pass down to our children, is present and is meaningful, but it does not overpower the very literariness of the short-story, which is something to appreciate in any piece of fiction. Within Alice Walker, the writer has supremacy over the activist, and it is worth noting that, only when activist agendas cease to be the main moving force behind the act of writing and

are merely pushed to the background, when there is art for art's sake, can literature actually start to heal those who have been affected by violence, be it racially-motivated or otherwise.

Moreover, if Myop, a ten-year-old child, had witnessed the actual lynching, her trauma would have been so deep, that it would probably have affected her mental stability and rendered her unable to derive any understanding from the incident. If atrocious acts of violence are committed in their presence, children often remain locked in a deep state of shock, often including denial and consciously – or unconsciously – imposed muteness and leading to emotional alienation, for considerable periods of time, sometimes even for the rest of their lives. By only stumbling upon the decayed corpse some time after the murder, however, Myop is able to realize, on the one hand, that she must leave the innocent child she used to be behind, and, on the other hand, that she has to choose between continuing the legacy of the inter-racial hatred and violence that the adults around her seem so immersed in, or becoming part of a more tolerant generation. What she will opt for we can only speculate on, but, practically, these are the two options faced by the children who witness or experience violence. Thus, they can see violent conduct as an example and start to replicate it: “Those children who are beaten will in turn give beatings, those who are intimidated will be intimidating, those who are humiliated will impose humiliation, and those whose souls are murdered will murder.” (Miller 36)

### 3. Conclusion

Indeed, children are virtual *blank slates* on which adults can write, and the message that the latter choose to scribble onto them is too often a violent one. Unfortunately, it is not rare that one can read it on their frail bodies or their impressionable minds. In Myop's case, however, it is probably little what the grown-ups in her family could have done to protect her from her premature revelation of racism, as there is little in their power when it comes to preventing any of the future abuse she herself will undoubtedly suffer because of it, given the impotence that derives from their precarious position as members of the oppressed race in a color-segregated South. In a context in which able-bodied men are rendered powerless in the face of unfounded hatred and can be murdered so easily, ten-year-old African American girls are virtually defenseless. Myop comprehends this the instant she realizes who the lynched man was, but what she experiences is much more than the self-preservation instinct asserting itself: her laying down the flowers next to the body is, in fact, the moment in which she understands, for the first time in her life, who she is. It is the moment in which she connects, through that particular victim, with all the victims of centuries of oppression. It is the moment in which she truly becomes part of her people.

Unfortunately, the history that they share and that Myop is now forced to embrace is a troubled one. It is a history of exploitation and humiliation. A history of violence, concentrated in the two pages of “The Flowers,” the tale of a little girl, a bouquet and a lynching. A tale in which there is no sterile writing, of the type language manipulators aspiring to the status of writers use, juggling with words so that they form beautifully crafted sentences that are in fact hollow. A tale which makes the words of Scottish-born American naturalist John Muir, meant to support the necessity of exposing children to death as a mere fact of life so as to ensure their healthy psychological growth, sound so painfully bitter:

But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony. (140)

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