

The Welcome Table by Alice Walker



Alice Walker is an African American writer whose contribution to the world literature can be hardly evaluated. Walker is the writer of a wide profile: poet, essayist, novelist, and short story writer. Alice Walker's writing focuses on such challenging themes as racial discrimination, socio-economic hardships of African American people, human relationships in society, and African American culture. Being honored to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 and National Book Award for the novel *The Color Purple*, the writer became a prominent figure in the literature. In 1967, Walker published her first work in the genre of the essay known as *The Civil Right Movement: What Good Was It?*. This was a very powerful work reflecting writer's involvement in the civil rights movement. The novelist has been inspired by her background, and thus her major literary pieces such as "Third Life of Grange Copeland" (1970), "The Welcome Table" (1970), "Meridian" (1976), and "The Color of Purple" (1982) show suffering and loss many African American people experienced during the civil rights movement, as well as daily life in America. The author's connection to her stories is very powerful that makes them individual and unique.

In her short story, *The Welcome Table*, the author demonstrated racial discrimination of African American people through the portrayal of an old woman. On Sunday, the woman, overcoming distance and indescribable in the freezing cold, tries to go to the church which all-white people attend. Nearly blind and wrinkled lady wore perfectly polished high shoes, long mildewed dress with an old corsage, and the remains of a silk scarf (Walker, "In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women"). The heroine was met more than coldly and soon the

preacher asked her to leave the church. The woman did not obey this demand, and thus she was physically thrown out into the cold street. After this cruel episode, the old lady encounters Christ walking up the road toward the woman. Eventually, many of African American people along the road became witnesses of the old woman's death – she high-stepped down the highway gesturing with her hand. In this respect, the encounter of the heroine with Jesus can be regarded as a salvation from the racism she faced with in church. The woman seems to be happy because she is released from suffering and pain. Therefore, the church scene is a commentary on mankind's inhumanity to mankind expressed through racial terrorism and discrimination.

The old woman struggles with the established system in order to be accepted in society, but the episode in church shows woman's failure due to the color of her skin. From the heroine's appearance and clothes mentioned above, it can be assumed that was simple African American woman with a stressful and poor life. In addition to this, later talking to Jesus, the heroine complained about hard work for white people and the injustices done to her. Nevertheless, the woman was preparing to visit church – her shoes were polished about the tops and toes (Walker, “In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women”). Searching for happiness, the old lady came to church but instead of sympathy she met indifference and racism. All white people were looking at her with confusion, and they did not know what to do. Some people were thinking of black workers, maids, and other working staff, whereas others were recalling of black mistresses. Nevertheless, all of the white people had something in common – they were afraid of the thought that black people might invade their sanctuary, their church. According to Walker, “And they all gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror unknown as well as of the deeply known” (*In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women*). Thus, they saw this old woman as a threat that could bring their fear into reality. Overcoming these disparaging looks and rigorous treatment, the heroine was determined to

survive in the grim situation. Thereby, the old lady's visit to the church of all-white people can be regarded as a courageous act of the person who is aimed to fight for her rights.

The old woman is unwelcomed not only in the world of white people, but what is more ironical, in the church supposed to be open for everyone. When the woman entered the church, the preacher stopped her saying, “Auntie, you know this is not your church?” (Walker, “In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women”). This episode is ridiculous and seems ironical because there is not supposed to be any kind of discrimination in the house of God. Walker’s irony is evident when she states “As if one could choose the wrong one” (*In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women*), underlining that in the eyes of God all people are equal despite the color of their skin. Moreover, this scene demonstrates that the preacher aimed to tell others the word of God actually knows nothing about it. Jesus Christ lived His whole life with love, kindness, and forgiveness. Furthermore, He shared His dinner table wrongdoers and ministered to the poor. Unfortunately, the teaching of God as well as forgiveness were ignored both by the preacher and the white people in the church. Ironically, the preacher referred to the woman using a gentle word 'auntie'. However, the man was not aimed to invite her to the church but to ask her to leave it showing himself as inhospitable and hateful. In the house of God, the majority of followers of Christianity behaved in a way Jesus would not approve. Thus, the church scene depicts though how the white people are hiding discrimination behind the politeness and compassion.

Being thrown out of the church, the main character of the short story succeeded to find her own path to Jesus. Regardless of miseries and severe challenges of life, the woman had not lost her faith. Although the heroine had many grievances on her difficult life and against other people, she held no disdain. In this respect, the encounter with Jesus can be observed as a reward for all her wanderings. According to Walker, “Except that he was not carrying in his arms a baby sheep,

he looked exactly like the picture of him that she had hanging over her bed” (*In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women*). Thus, the woman saw Jesus as she imagined Him to look. Furthermore, Christ was the only character in the story who displayed love and kindness to this woman listening to her talk. In the story, Jesus is a symbol of faith and equality demonstrating that all people are equal to Him regardless the color of their skin or social status. In contrast, the white people in the church were too occupied with seeing the color of the heroine's skin that they had not noticed a human being seeking for the same God. Therefore, everything the woman had known throughout her whole life was suffering and mistreatment of white people. Eventually, the character received compassion and peace from the white man who showed what it really means to be Christian. Thus, the main character of the story had not lost morality and humanity, and as a result she became rewarded.

Therefore, *The Welcome Table* is a short story engaging the readers into the issue of racial discrimination from sociological and moral perspectives. Walker's literary work demonstrates how dangerous Christian teachings and values could be in the wrong hands. The main character of the story was searching for God in the church but instead of Him she found inhumanity of white people. Lacking of morality, the followers of Christianity were judging and discriminating poor woman in the house of God supposed to be open for every person. Nevertheless, the heroine eventually found love and kindness she was seeking for from Jesus, who showed how real Christian should act. Thus, *The Welcome Table* is a story about discrimination, poverty, hatred, and love. Moreover, in the literary piece, the church scene is a portrayal of people's ignorance and cruelty toward others regarding their social and economical capabilities or racial origins. The main heroine, who endured a lot of pain and suffering in her life, finally was awarded for her miseries.