The Flowers
by Alice Walker
Analysis and Essays
The Story

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.

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,

Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop walked along the fence till it ran into the stream made by the spring. Around the spring, where the family got drinking water, silver ferns and wildflowers grew. Along the shallow banks pigs rooted. Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream.

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes. She found, in addition to various common but pretty ferns and leaves, an armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges and a sweet suds bush full of the brown, fragrant buds.

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep.
The Story

Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes. Her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose, and she reached down quickly, unafraid, to free herself. It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise.

He had been a tall man. From feet to neck covered a long space. His head lay beside him. When she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris Myop saw that he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken, long fingers, and very big bones. All his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls. The buckles of the overall had turned green.

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled--barely there--but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.
In a well-organized essay discuss how Alice Walker conveys the meaning of "The Flowers" and how she prepares the reader for the ending of this short story. Consider at least two elements of the writer's craft such as imagery, symbol, setting, narrative pace, diction, and style.

Discuss!
Prompt Analysis: Read and analyze the prompt

When you receive an essay prompt, ask yourself the following questions:

• 1. Do I understand the topic?
  – a. If you do, briefly define the topic in a short phrase or sentence. This will help streamline your thought process later
    • i. In a well-organized essay discuss how Alice Walker conveys the meaning of "The Flowers" and how she prepares the reader for the ending of this short story. Consider at least two elements of the writer's craft such as imagery, symbol, setting, narrative pace, diction, and style.

  – b. If you don’t, refer back to the text and analyze the terminology. What of the question do you understand? What can you find that you understand?

• 2. What is the prompt asking me to do?
  – a. Identify the information you provide.
Prompt Analysis:
Read and analyze the prompt

– b. Analyze the verbs the prompt is using
  • i. Explain: make something clear by giving reasons or examples; tell how and why
  • ii. Discuss: give details about; illustrate with examples
  • iii. Define: briefly tell what something means
  • iv. Analyze: examine each part of the whole in a systematic way, then evaluate
  • v. In what ways/ How:
vi. Argue/defend/justify/support: give evidence to show why an idea is right or good

vii. Categorize/classify: sort into groups based on a given set of traits or features

viii. Compare & contrast: point out similarities (compare) and differences (contrast)

ix. Determine cause & effect: decide what leads to an event or circumstance (cause) and what results from an event or circumstance (effect)

x. Evaluate/judge/assess: Determine the worth or wisdom of an opinion, belief or idea
Prompt Analysis:
Read and analyze the prompt

• 3. How is it asking me the question?
  – a. Analyze the terminology used.
    • i. Look at the key words the prompt uses to define the issue or exigency.
    • ii. Example: well-organized essay, discuss how Alice Walker conveys the meaning of "The Flowers," and ... prepares the reader for the ending, [c]onsider at least two elements of the writer's craft ...

• 4. Is there more than one part to this question?
  – a. Make sure you are answering the question.
  – b. Is there more than one verb present?
  – c. Is there more than one term present?
  – d. What must I define in order to answer the question?

• 5. What documents or sources do I think I will need for support?
  – a. Begin editing or trimming away what you need from what you don’t need.
    • i. Consider LISTING the facts you need to know.
 Literary Terms to Know

• imagery – the use of vivid language to create images in the reader’s mind.
• symbol – something that stands for itself and something else.
• setting – the time and place in which a story occurs.
• narrative pace - the speed at which an author tells a story; the movement from one point or section to another.
• diction - the choice of words used in a literary work.
• style - A writer’s way of saying things, or a philosophy that influences the author’s viewpoint.
• theme - an abstract idea that emerges from a literary work’s treatment of its subject-matter, or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. Themes include love, war, revenge, betrayal, fate, etc.
• epiphany - an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure
Exemplary Prose Passage Essay for "The Flowers" by Alice Walker

**Essay Question:** In a well-organized essay discuss how Alice Walker conveys the meaning of "The Flowers" and how she prepares the reader for the ending of this short story. Consider at least two elements of the writer's craft such as imagery, symbol, setting, narrative pace, diction, and style.

"...the days had never been as beautiful as these...each day a golden surprise." Surprise is the element Alice Walker presents in her story "The Flowers." It is at the heart of the meaning of this story which is driven forward by imagery, setting, and diction.

In the beginning of the story, Walker utilizes diction that creates an atmosphere of euphoric childhood innocence. Myop, the main character, "skipped lightly." Walker describes the harvests, which evince "excited little tremors" in Myop as she anticipates the new day.
This jocund diction continues into the second paragraph. Specifically, Myop feels "light and good" in the heat of the warm sun. In addition, ten year old Myop creates her own world in which nothing exists "but her song." In line 8, the use of onomatopoeia, "tat-de'ta'ta" reinforces the idea of a happy, carefree youth.

Paragraph three, however, marks a small yet significant shift in the passage. Walker begins the paragraph with "Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop..." Myop's world is not behind her, but moves forward to the familiar woods.

As the story progresses, there is a significant shift in paragraphs four and five. Walker begins to prepare the reader for her profound conclusion. While Myop has often explored the woods behind the house with her mother, today she sets out alone and "made her own path." As she walks through the woods, she cautiously keeps an eye out for snakes. The solitude of her journey, and the possibility of danger, builds suspense and prepares the reader for the dark surprise of the ending.
The diction of paragraphs four and five also contributes to the sudden shift in the passage. While the diction in the beginning was blithe, describing "beautiful," the language in paragraph five is negative, foreshadowing the conclusion. Specifically, Myop is disoriented by the, "strangeness of the land." It was "not as pleasant" as her usual expeditions. Furthermore, words such as "gloomy" and "damp" reiterate the dark setting and prepare the reader for the grotesque conclusion of the story.

Paragraph six, which is only one sentence long, marks a brief transition into the ending of the passage. Myop wants to return to her house, to the "peacefulness of the morning." But, while she was able to turn her back on the reality of her poverty, she will not be able to ignore the next truth that hits her.
"Stepping smack into his eyes," Myop encounters death, but is unafraid as she "frees herself." She is filled with innocent curiosity and gazes "around the spot with interest." **Ironically**, as she picks her "wild pink rose," a **symbol of beauty**, she spots the noose and has her epiphany.

The transition in image, setting, and diction all propel Walker's theme--the coming of age. In the last paragraph Myop picks up the flowers and places her bouquet in front of the lynched man. It is as if she is at a funeral, as if she has sobered from her carefree state to one of realization. For, in the last line, the images of the beginning are finally crushed. Myop can no longer return to the world of flower-gathering or sun-lit skipping. For Myop, the "summer is over."
This is a high-ranking essay for the following reasons:

• Indicates complete understanding of the prompt

• Cites appropriate details to support the thesis: imagery, diction, and setting

• Thoroughly explores contrasts

• Presents unique insights into the underlying theme

• Adheres well to topic, exhibits transitions, and connective tissue

• Has a definite, clear progression of thought and a strong writer's voice

• *This essay falls into the high range because it presents a solid, mature, and insightful discussion and analysis of Myop's "epiphany" and how Walker prepares the reader for it
Another Approach

• In a well-organized essay discuss how Alice Walker conveys the meaning of "The Flowers" and how she prepares the reader for the ending of this short story. Consider at least two elements of the writer's craft such as imagery, symbol, setting, narrative pace, diction, and style.
Literary Terms to Know

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- symbol – something that stands for itself and something else.
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- diction - the choice of words used in a literary work.
- style - A writer’s way of saying things, or a philosophy that influences the author’s viewpoint.
- theme - an abstract idea that emerges from a literary work’s treatment of its subject-matter, or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. Themes include love, war, revenge, betrayal, fate, etc.
- epiphany - an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure
“The Flowers” by Alice Walker
An Analysis

In this very short story, Alice Walker tells of a young, African American girl who, while gathering flowers, stumbles quite literally upon the body of a dead man. The atmosphere, language and subject matter of the story suggest the southern United States as a setting-sometime in the mid- to late-20th century seems an appropriate time period, though this is far less clear.

The contrast between the story's beginning and end is striking. We begin with a light-hearted description of the life of Myop, a young girl-she skips along and taps her stick, enjoying the summer-but end with the loss of her innocence. Indeed, the key image of the story comes at its climax: Myop, picking a pink rose for her bundle of flowers, notices the noose with which the dead man was hanged, realises how his death relates to her heritage, and lays down her flowers out of respect.

The first three paragraphs are devoted to setting the scene-describing Myop ("...her dark brown hand...") and putting her in context ("...her family's sharecropper cabin...", "...the spring, where her family got drinking water..."). Effective description provides credibility to the environment, and makes the later events all the more shocking: "Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water rose and slid away down the stream."
The end the third paragraph sees Myop collect "an armful of strange blue flowers..." These flowers go on to become the main object of the story, hence the title, and hold symbolic meaning—the flowers, representing Myop's innocence, are ultimately lost.

In the fourth paragraph, Walker hints at the events to come with a change of atmosphere: "The air was damp, the silence close and deep." Compare this to the first paragraph: "The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch." As Myop becomes increasingly uneasy about the strangeness of her surroundings, the story pivots abruptly: "It was then that she stepped smack into his eyes." Despite the gradual darkening of tone which precedes it, this turning-point is shocking, for both its brevity and its strange ambiguity: how, exactly, does one step into a pair of eyes?
"The Flowers" by Alice Walker
An Analysis

The sickening explanation is, of course, soon divulged: "...lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose..." What follows shows Myop to be strangely unafraid, hinting at either experience of something similar, or at complete confusion in an alien situation: "It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise." I am inclined to take the latter view-the mouth is the only thing that Myop can use as a reference point, given the decaying nature of the bones, and she only experiences fear upon realising that she has stepped into a human skull.

Detailed description of the body follows this, which adds context and meaning to the death, leading up to the story's conclusion. From the "threads of blue denim from his overalls", we can deduce that the man was a worker, and, although sweeping generalizations must be avoided, his large bones and teeth, combined with his occupation and cause of death, indicate his probable ethnicity-African American, like Myop.
“The Flowers” by Alice Walker
An Analysis

The final paragraph is very poetic in its language, suiting the story's poignant conclusion. The crucial moment, at which Myop sees the rose, is described with flowing alliteration: "...a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root.", "...blending benignly into the soil." The penultimate and ultimate sentences are both short and simple, the latter also being foregrounded for increased emphasis. Although the story is very final in its conclusion, questions are left unanswered: who, exactly, are the girl and man depicted, and where? This ambiguity is clearly intentional, allowing the story to be applied to many people and places.

While the reasoning behind any work of literature can never be conclusively deduced by anybody but the author themself, it would appear that Alice Walker wrote The Flowers to highlight both the violently racist past of America's southern states, and, through the link with Myop, the relationship that all African Americans have to that particular period of history. On a lesser scale, racism is still common in such regions, and Walker, as black woman, would presumably wish to draw attention to this continuing injustice-again, the story's ambiguous nature allows it to remain relevant.
“The Flowers” by Alice Walker
An Analysis

To conclude, through The Flowers, Walker manages, in only eight paragraphs, to convey an effective and meaningful story, showing the effect that America's violent history has on its children.

Discuss!