



## LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S "WOMEN"

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on the basic information about a summary and analysis of Alice Walker's 'Women'. African-American writer Alice Walker describes and discusses many topics and opposes and ridicules the main agent of humanism, which represents white men as women and animal activists. 'Women' by Alice Walker is a short free-verse poem telling of the fight women put up so girls could have access to education. The poem lauds specifically African American women who were slaves in America. Using military diction and imagery, Walker describes how these women's resilience and sacrifice enabled them to achieve their goal. With "Women", the poet promotes womanism, a form of feminism recognizing and appreciating the struggles of black women.*

Alice Walker published "Women" in her first collection of poems, *Once*, in 1968. The poem's speaker praises the strength, courage, and perseverance of the Black women of her "mama's generation." Despite not being given the opportunity and resources to excel at (or possibly even attend) school, these women fought for their children to have access to education. The poem further implies that education is an important tool for the liberation of communities oppressed by racism, sexism, and classism.

The poem begins with Walker's persona introducing her subject matter women of the preceding generation on a reverent note. The first eighteen lines of "Women" employ imagery generally associated with men to characterize these women. They are aggressive, courageous, and tenacious as they face down obstacles stated with implied metaphors. Subsequent lines reveal what they fight for: their female children's rights to education. This highlights the motherly love and wisdom behind the resilience of the women in Walker's poem. Throughout 'Women,' the persona's appreciative tone doesn't change as she speaks of them.

'Women' is a 1970 poem by Alice Walker (born 1944), one of the best-known African American writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Although she is probably most famous for her 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, Walker has written short stories and numerous other novels. She also started out her published career as a poet. In 'Women', Alice Walker pays tribute to the women of her mother's generation: tough, resolute women who were able



to balance their private domestic duties with a fight for better opportunities for their children. Before we offer a closer and more detailed analysis of the poem's meaning and themes, let's briefly summarise its content.

The poem comprises a single stanza. Walker begins by summoning her mother's generation of women. They were true women: they had rather dry, throaty, gruff voices and walked firmly and with a clear sense of purpose. They were able to break down barriers that stood in their way, using not only their hands but their fists (implying anger and strength, as well as that *purpose* again).

But they could also do the more traditionally 'womanly' things of the time, like ironing their husbands' starched white shirts for work. Indeed, such women were effectively leaders of armies of other women: they wore rags around their heads and commanded and inspired women to follow them. The struggles they faced in society, to gain access to things like books and places where their daughters might study, were like a field full of booby traps and landmines. These women well understood that it was important for their daughters to get a good education, even though they never had one themselves.

### Black Women's Strength, Perseverance, and Sacrifice.

"Women" celebrates the strength and perseverance of Black women who fought against both racism and sexism in order to provide a better future for their children. Metaphorically describing these women as "generals" leading "armies" through mine-filled fields, the speaker conveys the immense obstacles that they had to overcome to provide their children with opportunities that they themselves never had. The poem honors the sacrifices these women made for future generations, implying that their selflessness and courage created a path to a better world.

The speaker begins by highlighting the strength and tenacity of the women who came before her. She says the women of her "mama's generation" were "Husky of voice" and "stout of / Step," suggesting that they didn't have the luxury of being dainty and delicate. They had to speak gruffly and walk resolutely in the direction of their goals, implicitly because the twin barriers of racism and sexism made it incredibly difficult for them to move up in the world. Indeed, the speaker also mentions how they "ironed / Starched white / shirts," likely nodding to the kind of domestic work Black women so often found themselves limited to in a post-slavery but still-racist society.

The speaker says these women had "fists" as well as "hands," suggesting that their tenacity and ability to nurture the next generation were two sides of the same coin. "They were women," the speaker says, but they "battered down / Doors" (that is, fiercely fought for change and new opportunities). And in describing them as "Headragged generals," an allusion to the knotted headgear traditionally worn by Black women, the speaker dignifies such labor and these women's struggles to those of leaders in wartime. These women marched "Across mined / Fields" and "Booby-trapped / Ditches," metaphorical imagery that suggests how dangerous this "war" was for these women and hammers home their bravery and selflessness.

In the poem's final moments, the speaker emphasizes that these women were not undertaking this fight only on their own behalf: they "discovered books" and "Desks" and finally "A place" not for themselves, but for their *children*. In other words, these women gave their own time, energy, comfort, and even safety in order to ensure future generations would



get an education—and, it follows, wouldn't be confined by the same obstacles that made their own lives difficult. They fought so that their children would have access to opportunities they themselves never had, and the poem honors and celebrates their sacrifice.

### 'Women': analysis

Alice Walker was born in 1944, the daughter of sharecroppers Minnie Lou Grant and Willie Lee Walker, and grew up in Eatonville, Georgia. Walker's mother worked as a domestic servant and was a talented gardener, with her daughter later paying homage to the gardens her mother cultivated.

And in many ways, 'Women' is first and foremost a tribute to her mother's tenacity and generosity, although – as the plural of the title immediately suggests – she is paying homage to a whole generation of women who helped to make the opportunities Walker herself, and other women of her own generation, have been able to use.

During the 1960s, Walker had become involved in the US civil rights movement. Indeed, for a time she moved from her home state of Georgia and worked in New York City in the welfare department. Her work reflects not only the struggles of women of Walker's mother's generation but, more specifically, the struggles of African-American women, for whom life was doubly hard and opportunities even smaller in number.

Walker is at pains to emphasise that her mother's generation were not only firebrands or warriors, despite the military language she employs in the poem. Nor, however, does she want to suggest that her mother and other women like her were simply conventional wives and mothers who looked after their children and carried out everyday household tasks.

Instead, they did both. This is neatly encapsulated by the reference to the women having fists *as well as* hands. Fists are, of course, made from hands: the hands that the women use to conduct their mundane domestic chores could also be tightened into a more bellicose or defiant pose. Fists need not imply violence, and the image that follows links these fists with the act of banging down doors, to get people's attention and to gain access to places they had been forbidden to set foot before.

Alice Walker's 'Women' is written in free verse. This means that the poem lacks a rhyme scheme or a regular metre or rhythm. But this is not the same as saying that the poem is without any structure or control. Instead, Walker uses enjambment in the poem to great effect. This term (derived from the French) describes a literary device whereby a sentence or phrase continues past the end of a particular verse line and into the next.

And if we analyse 'Women' more closely, we find little punctuation. Indeed, there are just two punctuation marks in the whole poem: the dash in the third line, which sharply delineates, but also links, the women's sharp and resolute features, and the full stop at the very end of the poem.

Otherwise, 'Women' is a poem without conventional punctuation. But as T. S. Eliot once observed, verse is itself a system of punctuation. Line endings provide their own pauses in the flow of the poem, as well as joining the thoughts expressed on one line with those that follow in the next.

And in this poem, Walker enacts brief momentary pauses between lines by withholding the final detail until the next line at a given moment: consider how, after 'fists', we must wait for 'Hands' in the next line; or how the battering down of those 'Doors' is delayed for



maximum shock value as we wait for the other shoe to drop (or fist to fall) onto those doors in the line that follows.

The overall effect is to create a purposeful, resolute march towards progress as the women bravely work to carve out a brighter and more hopeful future for their children. The effect would be very different if the words were rearranged as prose, or even into longer lines. Each word, each new revelation, has the force of a mini-surprise because it is isolated onto a single line.

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