Background

Sharecroppers Alice Walker, the writer of this essay, was the daughter of sharecroppers. In exchange for housing, seed, and tools, sharecroppers worked long, hard hours and then gave the bulk of their crops to the landowners. This difficult lifestyle was common among African Americans who lived in the South at the time Walker was growing up.

Connecting to the Literature

Reading/Writing Connection In this essay, Alice Walker shares her memories of her mother. Write a few sentences about a person who has shaped your life in some way. Use at least three of these words: appreciate, contribute, demonstrate, interact.

Meet the Author

Alice Walker (b. 1944)

Alice Walker was born in Eatonville, Georgia, the child of Tallulah Grant Walker and Willie Lee Walker. Her sharecropper parents earned as little as $300 a year. All the Walker children had to help by working in the fields, milking cows, and doing other chores. Their mother stood at the center of the family and "made a way out of no way."

A Life Rich in Experiences Both of Walker's parents were gifted storytellers, and they recounted engaging folk tales as well as family stories. Tallulah Walker shared her spirit and her artistic creations—food, clothing, and flowers—with her family and community.

Despite her family's limited financial resources, Walker went to college. The artist in Walker blossomed, and she became a very popular writer. Her novel The Color Purple won the Pulitzer Prize.

Fast Facts

- Walker was the youngest of eight children.
- The Color Purple was made into a successful motion picture.

Go Online

Author Link For: More about the author
Visit: www.phschool.com
Web Code: ume-6305

Review

For Reading Skill, Literary Analysis, and Vocabulary Builder, see page 388.
My mother made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds.

During the "working" day, she labored beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my

Literary Analysis
Reflective Essay
What experience or idea do you think Walker will reflect on in this essay? Explain.
mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.

But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?

The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low.

For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by “an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.”

If we could locate this “anonymous” black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers—an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.

And so it is, certainly, with my own mother. Unlike “Ma” Rainey’s songs, which retained their creator’s name even while blasting forth from Bessie Smith’s mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother’s name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge.

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1. mutilated, but vibrant: damaged, but still energetic and lively.
2. Smithsonian Institution: museums with exhibits in the fields of science, art, and history.
3. “Ma” Rainey’s songs . . . Bessie Smith’s mouth: Gertrude (“Ma”) Rainey, one of America’s first blues singers, lived during the early years of the twentieth century. Bessie Smith (1898–1937) was a well-regarded blues singer who knew and learned from “Ma” Rainey.

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Vocabulary Builder

anonymous (ə nəˈnəns) adj.
unacknowledged;
unknown

Reading Skill

Main Idea: What repeated words suggest the essay’s main idea?

> Critical Viewing

In what ways are quilts like this one art? [Analyze]
that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. It is probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am.

But the telling of these stories, which came from my mother's lips as naturally as breathing, was not the only way my mother showed herself as an artist. For stories, too, were subject to being distracted, to dying without conclusion. Dinners must be started, and cotton must be gathered before the big rains. The artist that was and is my mother showed itself to me only after many years. This is what I finally noticed:

Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until...

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4. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the title of a novel by Alice Walker.
late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit,\textsuperscript{5} uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on.

And I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art.

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.

Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy\textsuperscript{6} of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.

For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time.

This poem is not enough, but it is something, for the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers:

\begin{center}
\textit{They were women then}
\textit{My mama's generation}
\textit{Husky of voice—Stout of}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{5} cold pit: hole in which seedlings are planted at the beginning of spring.
\textsuperscript{6} legacy (leg’ e se) n. something handed down by a parent or an ancestor.
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starved white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged  
Generals  
Across mined  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Kitchens  
To discover books  
Desks  
A place for us  
How they knew what we  
Must know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it  
Themselves.

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own.

And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang—in a voice like Roberta Flack’s—sweetly over the compounds of her village; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems that we know.

Perhaps Phillis Wheatley’s mother was also an artist.

Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley’s biological life is her mother’s signature made clear.

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7. headragged (hed’ ragd) adj. with head wrapped around by a rag or kerchief.
8. mined (mind) adj. filled with buried explosives that are set to go off when stepped on.
9. Roberta Flack’s: Roberta Flack, an African American singer, was very popular in the 1970s.
10. ingenious (in jen’ ya) adj. clever and inventive.
11. Phillis Wheatley’s: Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was a poet, considered the first important black writer in America.