

# Before You Read

## from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker

### LITERARY FOCUS: PERSONAL ESSAY

A **personal essay** is a short piece of nonfiction writing that explores a topic in a personal way. The topic can be anything at all that interests the writer; the best personal essays often show how the writer's own experiences and emotional life connect with more universal concerns. Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, and George Orwell are noted for their personal essays.

### READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING THE MAIN IDEA

Unlike formal essays, personal essays are often casual and conversational. They may even ramble and get off the subject for a brief time. But a good personal essay, no matter how informally it is written, is always focused on at least one main idea.

**Use the Skill** As you read this famous essay, mark the beginning of each new topic. When you have finished, go back and make a list of all the topics you have marked. Check to see if the writer has provided a one-sentence generalization that covers *all* of the topics. If you can't find such a sentence, then you must look at all the topics, think about the essay's title, and then infer the main idea that unifies the essay. Your statement of the main idea should be broad enough to cover all the topics in the essay.



Alice Walker.

### REVIEW SKILLS

As you read this essay, analyze the author's use of **metaphor**, a type of figurative language.

### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of another.

### SKILLS FOCUS

#### Literary Skills

Understand a personal, or informal, essay.

#### Reading Skills

Identify the main idea.

#### Review Skills

Identify figurative language.

from IN SEARCH OF  
**Our Mothers’  
Gardens**

Alice Walker

IDENTIFY

Skim the essay, and find the page on which a poem appears. Then, count the number of footnotes in the essay that identify *specific people*. Jot down what you discover.

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IDENTIFY

Underline details that describe the personality of Walker’s mother (lines 5–8).

CLARIFY

Pause at line 24. What does Walker want to discover?

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VOCABULARY

**vibrant** (vī’brənt) *adj.*: full of energy.

In the late 1920s my mother ran away from home to marry my father. Marriage, if not running away, was expected of seventeen-year-old girls. By the time she was twenty, she had two children and was pregnant with a third. Five children later, I was born. And this is how I came to know my mother: She seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not  
10 need to go to school.

She 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  
20 thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my 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?

From “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker. Copyright © 1974 by Alice Walker. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc. Electronic format by permission of Wendy Weil Agency, Inc.



## VOCABULARY

**medium** (mē'dē·əm) *n.*: material for an artist.

## INTERPRET

Pause at line 44. Why is Walker so impressed with the quilt she saw in the Smithsonian?

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## ANALYZE

Notice Walker's bracketed editorial changes in Woolf's essay, in lines 46–60. What do Walker's suggested changes reveal about her beliefs?

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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.

30 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

40 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.

As Virginia Woolf<sup>1</sup> wrote further, in *A Room of One's Own*:

50 Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class. [Change this to “slaves” and “the wives and daughters of sharecroppers.”] Now and again an Emily Brontë<sup>2</sup> or a Robert Burns<sup>3</sup> [change this to “a Zora Hurston or a Richard Wright”] blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils [or “Sainthood”<sup>4</sup>], of a wise woman selling herbs [our

1. **Virginia Woolf**: English novelist and critic. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf says that, in order to write, a woman must have a room of her own (privacy) and the means to support herself (money).
2. **Emily Brontë**: English novelist and poet, best known for her novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847).
3. **Robert Burns**: eighteenth-century Scottish poet.
4. **“Sainthood”**: In the early part of this essay, Walker talks about certain black women in the South called Saints. Intensely spiritual, these women were driven to madness by their creativity, for which they could find no release.



## VOCABULARY

**profusely** (prō · fyōōs'lē) *adv.*: in great quantities.

**conception** (kən · sep'shən) *n.*: mental formation of ideas.

## ANALYZE

In lines 84–94, Walker describes her mother's creativity with her flowers. How do these details support Walker's topic—that black women have inherited a “vibrant, creative spirit”?

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## IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Re-read lines 100–107. How do passersby react to the mother's garden? Why do they have this reaction?

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Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,<sup>8</sup> 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 late November. Before  
90 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,<sup>9</sup> 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.

100 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.

110 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 of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and

8. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: Alice Walker's first novel, published in 1970.

9. **cold pit**: shallow pit, usually covered with glass, that is used for rooting plants or sheltering young plants from temperature variations in the spring.





## from In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

**Reading Skills: Identifying the Main Idea** A **main idea** is the controlling idea that unifies an essay or any other piece of nonfiction writing. When you state the main idea of a text, you must be sure your statement covers all the key details in the text. In most texts, the overall main idea is not stated directly. Instead, as the reader, you have to consider all the key details in the essay and decide on a statement that covers them all.

Your first step in determining the main idea of an essay or of any other text is to list the text's main points or topics. Use the following informal outline form to list the main topics in Walker's essay.

Once you have listed the main topics, state, in one or two sentences, a main idea that covers all these topics. You will often find that the work's title gives you a clue to the main idea the writer wants to communicate. Be sure to consider Walker's title in your statement of the main idea.

Main Points in Essay	
Main Point #1	
Main Point #2	
Main Point #3	
Main Point #4	
Statement of Main Idea of Entire Essay:	

# Vocabulary Development

## from In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

### VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

**DIRECTIONS:** Write vocabulary words from the Word Box to complete the paragraph below. Use each word only once.

#### Word Box

vibrant  
medium  
profusely  
conception  
ingenious

Alice Walker's (1) \_\_\_\_\_ is words. Walker's poems, essays, and stories burst with lively, (2) \_\_\_\_\_ characters, much like the flowers in her mother's (3) \_\_\_\_\_ blooming garden. In this essay, Walker supports her (4) \_\_\_\_\_ of black women as exceptionally creative, with examples taken from the life of her own mother. Walker views her mother as a talented, (5) \_\_\_\_\_ woman who created beauty out of next to nothing.

### WORD ORIGINS

**DIRECTIONS:** An **etymology** refers to the history and development of a word. Use the information in this chart to help you identify the meaning and history of each boldface word. Write the letter of the correct definition on the line in front of the word.

Vocabulary Word	Latin Origin	Related Words
vibrant	<i>vibrare</i> : "to quiver; shake"	vibration
medium	<i>medius</i> : "between"	median strip; mediate
profusely	<i>profundere</i> : "to pour out"	profusion
conception	<i>conceptus</i> : "take in; receive"	concept; conceive
ingenious	<i>ingeniosus</i> : "gifted with genius"	ingenuity

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. **vibration** (a) repeated motion (b) stillness (c) noise
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. **mediate** (a) to work with two sides to come to an agreement (b) to pray very seriously (c) to give medicine to
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. **profusion** (a) small amount (b) lavish supply (c) confusion
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. **concept** (a) a process (b) an argument (c) an idea
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. **ingenuity** (a) meanness (b) cleverness (c) goodness



#### Vocabulary Skills

Use vocabulary in context. Understand word origins.