Women

SUMMARY

The speaker describes the women of her mother's generation, saying that their voices were gruff and their bodies sturdy and resolute. They could fight as well as nurture, with hands that both broke down barriers *and* did the ironing. They directed armies, these commanders wearing cloths knotted above their heads, leading them over treacherous terrain and trenches laced with traps in order to obtain school supplies and seats for their children. These women were well that their children needed to get an education, even though they themselves never got one.

THEMES

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

"Women" honors the sacrifices and bravery of Black women who fought tooth and nail for their children to have access to "books" and "Desks." In doing so, the poem reflects the importance and power of education. The women understood that their children "*Must* know"—must get formal schooling—if they were to have a better shot at life than their parents did. Despite not having been educated themselves, these women understood that access to education would equip their children with the necessary tools to enrich their lives and continue the fight against inequity.

The women who came before the speaker weren't fighting for just anything; they were specifically fighting so that their children could go to school and have all the supplies they needed to succeed. The speaker says these women "led" metaphorical "Armies" across treacherous landscapes in pursuit of "books" and "Desks," illustrating just how difficult it was to ensure that their children would get a chance to learn.

It's clear that these women understood the importance of formal education even though they hadn't been given the opportunity to pursue it themselves. The speaker says that her mother's generation was well aware of what it was their children needed to "know" even though they (that is, the women) didn't "know[] a page / Of it." That is, although these women had never been given the opportunity or resources to excel at, or perhaps even attend, school, they understood that doing so was vital for their children to get ahead. As such, they made sure their children wouldn't be forced to miss out as they had.

All in all, the poem acknowledges the way education opens "Doors" for people so that they can have "a place" in society. Education, the poem implies, is a necessary tool for knocking down the barriers of sexism, racism, and classism. For the children of the speaker's "mama's generation," education was a way to find a seat at the table. They would be able to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become who they wanted to be—and to continue battering down "Doors" for others.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 19-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

They were women ...
... Hands

The free verse poem begins with its speaker, whom readers might interpret as Walker herself, reflecting on the "women" of her "mama's generation." Saying "They were women then" suggests that they were, in a way, the epitome of *womanhood* itself—something the speaker associates with tenacity and courage.

Notice the use of parallelism in lines 3-4:

> Husky of voice—stout of
> Step

The phrases on either side of the em dash caesura mirror each other: they're grammatically identical. This draws attention to the ways that the women's gruff "voice[s]" reflected their tough, sturdy bodies. The crisp alliteration of "stout" and "Step" helps to evoke the women's rough voices and hardworking bodies, not to mention their firm devotion to their children.

Whoever these women were, they weren't delicate and pampered; they didn't lead easy lives; they had "fists as well as / Hands." In other words, though women are traditionally assigned the role of being soft, sensitive, and nurturing, these women were also hard, strong, and ready to fight. They were both mothers *and* warriors.

The enjambment across lines 3 and 4 ("stout of / Step") and across lines 5 and 6 ("as well as / Hands") propel readers forward, echoing the way these women took resolute "Step[s]."

LINES 7-11

How they battered ...
... Shirts

The women of the speaker's mother's generation "battered down" metaphorical "Doors," representing the societal obstacles that stood between them and the promise of a better future. The insistent /d/ alliteration and consonance ("battered down / Doors") draw attention to the women's persistence and strength; they didn't politely ask to be let in—they demanded it.

At the same time, these women "ironed / Starched white / Shirts." Here, the speaker nods to the kind of domestic labor traditionally assigned to women, particularly women of color. (Walker's own mother worked as a seamstress to earn extra income for her family.) In mentioning this kind of labor alongside the image of battering down doors, the speaker implies that they're two sides of the same coin: such domestic work requires its own kind of strength and deserves respect. It was often the only kind of work women of the speaker's mother's generation could find in a racist, sexist world.

The sharp /s/ and /t/ sounds in "Starched white / shirts" evoke the stiffness of these clothes as well as the rigidity of a system that continued to oppress Black women, offering them little, if any, opportunity to get ahead.

LINES 12-18

How they led ...
... Ditches

Line 12 begins with anaphora, repeating the phrase "How they" that appeared at the beginning of line 7. This repetition creates momentum and emphasis, drawing attention to the actions that inspired the speaker's reflection on these women's lives. Anaphora also suggests a parallel between the women "batter[ing] down / Doors" and the fact that they "led" metaphorical "Armies." Both phrases suggest the way these women took charge of their children's futures, not leaving it up to chance whether or not their kids would end up living the same difficult lives they had.

The speaker builds on the war metaphor by calling the women "Headragged generals"—a reference to certain headwear traditionally worn by Black women. These women charged "Across mined / Fields" and "Booby-trapped / Ditches," implying that these women fought hard for their children's futures—and that this fight was a dangerous one. Considering the poem's context, the speaker implies that these women were waging war on racist, sexist, classist systems and beliefs.

Notice all the /d/ consonance in these lines ("led," "Headragged," "mined," etc.). These sounds are heavy, and they subtly weigh the poem down. In this way, they evoke just how difficult these women's battles were. The short, choppy lines illustrate that difficulty as well, creating the sense of the women slowly trudging through dangerous terrain.

LINES 19-27

To discover books ...
... Themselves.

The speaker finally reveals what, exactly, these women were fighting so hard for. They didn't just batter down doors and lead metaphorical armies across dangerous terrain for anything: they did it so that their children could have a shot at a real education. They were seeking "books" and "Desks" for their children: school supplies and admittance. The heavy /d/ alliteration of "discover" and "Desks" makes this moment sound all the more momentous and powerful.

In short, the women fought for resources and opportunities that the dominant white society had historically denied Black people. Indeed, the speaker says that through obtaining "books" and "Desks" for their children, these women secured "A place" for them: more than just entrance into schools, but a metaphorical seat at the table, a "place" in society. Their sacrifice meant that their children would not have to work themselves ragged in fields or as maids. (This is reflected in the poet's own success: her parents were sharecroppers, but Walker herself attended school from a young age, studied at a prestigious university, and became one of the most recognized writers of her generation.)

In the poem's final lines, the speaker honors the wisdom and intuition of these women. Though they never had the opportunity to go to school themselves, they knew that access to education would enrich their children's lives and provide them with a shot at a better future. Polyptoton (the repetition of "knew" / "know" / "knowing") highlights the women's innate understanding of the importance of education. It also emphasizes the importance of knowledge more generally.

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"Women" doesn't use any punctuation until its final line, a technique that fills the poem with a sense of relentless motion. Many of the poem's lines are also strongly enjambed, their phrases stepping across line breaks to pull readers down the page. This enjambment has a few important effects on the poem, at once evoking the women's tenacious spirits and the difficulty of the journey they undertook on their children's behalf.

The poem begins with two end-stopped lines (because the poet doesn't use any punctuation to indicate end-stops, the reader must rely on syntax to know when to pause or proceed), making the opening feel contemplative and conventional. But beginning with line 3 ("Husky of voice—stout of"), there are frequent enjambments. Take a look at lines 7-11, all of which can be considered enjambed:

> How they battered down
> Doors
> And ironed
> Starched white
> Shirts

These enjambed lines pick up momentum and force, suggesting the way that these women broke down barriers and overcame every obstacle to provide better futures for their children.

Enjambment, then, frequently creates urgency and breathlessness in "Women." The way the poem unfurls down the page without pausing for punctuation mirrors the way these women had to keep moving forward—keeping "batter[ing] down / Doors" and charging through metaphorically "mined / Fields" and "Booby-trapped / Ditches" for their children.

At the same time, however, frequent enjambment creates a sense of fragmentation: it's as though the poem's lines have been chopped up. Somewhat paradoxically, then, enjambment also *slows down* the poem by *stretching* its phrases across multiple lines. This subtly conveys the difficulty of the women's fight. The women kept going, the poem's enjambment suggests, but the going wasn't easy.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "of / Step"
- **Lines 5-6:** "as / Hands"
- **Lines 7-9:** "down / Doors / And"
- **Lines 9-10:** "ironed / Starched"
- **Lines 10-11:** "white / Shirts"
- **Lines 12-13:** "led / Armies"
- **Lines 15-16:** "mined / Fields"
- **Lines 17-18:** "trapped / Ditches"
- **Lines 22-24:** "what / we / Must"
- **Lines 24-25:** "know / Without"
- **Lines 25-26:** "page / Of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "it / Themselves"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration intensifies the language of "Women," making its depiction of these women's fight for their children sound all the more epic. Listen to lines 3-8:

> Husky of voice—stout of
> Step
> With fists as well as
> Hands
> How they battered down
> Doors

All this alliteration conveys the women immense strength. The crisp /st/ of "stout" and "step" evokes the firmness of those steps, for instance; the huffing /h/ of "Hands / How" conveys just how hard they worked; the booming /d/ of "down / Doors"

suggests their persistent pounding on the obstacles in their way.

Those biting /t/ and /s/ sounds appear in the next few lines as well, this time creating consonance: "Starched white / Shirts." The sharp sounds evoke the crispness of those shirts, made stiff by starching powder. In this way, the poem uses sound to bring its images to life.

There's more /d/ alliteration in lines 18-20:

> Ditches
> To discover books
> Desks

These emphatic /d/ sounds draw attention to what it was these women worked so hard for: a future in which their children could be educated. The assonance of the short /ih/ sound in "Ditches" and "discover" heightens the line's language further still.

Note that in addition to /d/ alliteration, there is also quite a bit of /d/ consonance trickling down lines 9-17 ("ironed," "Starched," "led," "Headragged," "mined / Fields," "Booby-trapped"). All these heavy sounds add a certain weightiness to the poem's language; readers can sense the women desperately trudging forward through difficult (metaphorical) terrain.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "were," "women"
- **Line 2:** "My," "mama's"
- **Line 3:** "Husky," "stout"
- **Line 4:** "Step"
- **Line 6:** "Hands"
- **Line 7:** "How," "down"
- **Line 8:** "Doors"
- **Line 18:** "Ditches"
- **Line 19:** "discover"
- **Line 20:** "Desks"
- **Line 22:** "what"
- **Line 23:** "we"
- **Line 25:** "Without"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help to illustrate the intensity of the women's fight for access to education for their children.

In lines 7-8, the speaker says:

> How they battered down
> Doors

The women weren't breaking down *literal* "Doors." Instead, these "Doors" represent the immense obstacles the women faced throughout their lives. The word "battered" suggests just how persistent and forceful these women had to be in order to overcome these obstacles; these doors were never going to be opened for them—they had to tear them down themselves.

The speaker then turns to an extended metaphor in lines 12-18, comparing the women's fight for access to education to an outright war. In doing so, the speaker conveys the immense danger of the women's task as well as their bravery. She calls them "Headragged generals," alluding to the head adornments often worn by Black women, who "Led / Armies [...] Across mined / Fields" and over "Booby-trapped / Ditches."

The speaker is describing the way these women were leaders in the fights to tear down societal barriers like sexism, racism, and classism. The metaphor of "mined / Fields" (or fields planted with explosives) and "Booby-trapped / Ditches" (or trenches laced with unseen dangers) suggests that these women risked their very lives for their children's futures.

Keep in mind this poem was written near the end of the civil rights movement, throughout which Black people—including Black *women*—faced police brutality, imprisonment, backlash from racist organizations, and/or losing their livelihoods for speaking up about injustice and rallying for equal rights. Though the poem is speaking metaphorically, the dangers these women faced were very real.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "How they battered down / Doors"
- **Lines 12-18:** "How they led / Armies / Headragged generals / Across mined / Fields / Booby-trapped / Ditches"

REPETITION

Repetition lends intensity and emphasis to the poem. In lines 3-4, for example, the poem uses parallel phrasing to convey the way these women's rough "voice[s]" echo their resolute actions:

> Husky of voice—stout of
> Step

The phrases on either end of the em dash (which creates a caesura) are grammatically identical, suggesting that these descriptions are two sides of the same coin. These are not delicate, soft-voiced women, but women who have worked hard their entire lives and who have learned to have "fists as well as / Hands." Their difficult lives have made them stronger than anyone should have to be. At the same time, the speaker admires their strength, because they used it to better the lives of their children.

The poem also uses anaphora, beginning lines 7, 12, and 22 with the phrase "How they [...]." This repetition draws the

reader back again and again to what made these women so remarkable and suggests the speaker's immense awe of their strength. It also provides the poem with a sense of building momentum and urgency.

Finally, the speaker uses polyptoton in lines 22-25 with the repetition of the words "knew," "know," and "knowing":

> How they **knew** what
> we
> *Must* **know**
> Without **knowing** a page

Through this repetition, the speaker honors these women's wisdom and intuition—things that, the speaker insists, were sharp despite the fact that they'd never had the chance to pursue an education. The speaker thus acknowledges and shows gratitude for the sacrifice of these smart, tenacious women.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Husky of voice—stout of / Step"
- **Line 7:** "How they"
- **Line 12:** "How they"
- **Line 22:** "How they," "knew"
- **Line 24:** "know"
- **Line 25:** "knowing"

VOCABULARY

Husky of voice (Line 3) - Having a gruff or hoarse-sounding voice.

Stout of step (Lines 3-4) - The speaker might be describing these women's sturdy and substantial bodies and/or the resolute way in which they moved.

Battered down (Lines 7-8) - Broke down through force.

Starched (Lines 9-11) - The shirts are stiff and crisp after being washed with starch powder.

Headragged (Line 14) - Wearing a piece of cloth tied about the head.

Booby-trapped (Line 17, Line 18) - Filled with hidden traps.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Women" contains 27 lines of free verse, spread across a single, sprawling stanza. The poem's lines are generally quite short, with some lines containing just one or two words. This gives the poem a long, narrow, and somewhat jagged appearance on the page, which subtly evokes the women's long, difficult journey through life. The short, frequently enjambed lines also create a sense of fragmentation, evoking the resolute "Step[s]" that these women took in the fight for their children's futures.

METER

"Women" is written in free verse, with no regular meter or rhyme scheme. This keeps the language accessible and straightforward, which is fitting for a poem about women who had no access to formal education. The poem is still quite lyrical thanks to its frequent use of enjambment, repetition, and alliteration, but it never feels overly strict or controlled.

RHYME SCHEME

As the poem is written in free verse, it doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. Instead of a rigid pattern of obvious rhymes, the poem uses other, subtler sonic devices—such as alliteration and repetition—to create more natural, modern lyricism.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Women" is almost certainly a stand-in for the poet, Alice Walker, herself. Both of Walker's parents worked as sharecroppers, and her mother earned extra income on the side as a seamstress (something the speaker alludes to hear with the mention of ironing "Starch white / Shirts"). Walker, meanwhile, was able to attend school from an early age, attend a prestigious college, and ultimately become one of the most distinguished writers and activists of her time.

The poem never actually specifies the speaker's gender, of course, and readers don't have to interpret the speaker as Walker herself in order to make sense of the poem. What's clear is that this person is the descendent of a "generation" of women who wanted their children to have access to opportunities that they, themselves, didn't have. The speaker comes across as profoundly grateful for the sacrifices these women made, casting them as courageous, dignified "generals" who fought fearlessly and tirelessly for their children's future.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clear setting, apart from taking place in the speaker's present, some years after her mother "battered down / Doors" on her behalf.

The physical descriptions in the poem are mostly metaphorical. The speaker describes "Headragged generals" commanding "Armies [...] / Across mined / Fields" and "Booby-trapped / Ditches." Of course, these women of the speaker's "mama's generation" weren't fighting in a *literal* war; they were fighting against racism, sexism, and classism. The poem's "mined / Fields" and "Booby-trapped / Ditches" suggest how dangerous

this fight was and just how high the stakes were. These women risked very real consequences in the name of providing their children with better opportunities than they themselves ever had.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though most famous for her Pulitzer Prize-winning 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker (born 1944) began publishing both poetry and prose in the 1960s. "Women" appears in her first poetry collection, *Once*, published in 1968.

Walker had actually written the poems in this collection a few years prior, at the height of the civil rights movement. Walker wrote "Women" for her mother, Minnie Lou Grant Walker, who worked hard as both a sharecropper and a seamstress in order to provide for her family. Many of the other poems in the collection are based on Walker's experiences traveling to East Africa and the depression she experienced leading up to and following her decision to end an unwanted pregnancy during her senior year at Sarah Lawrence College.

Walker is often linked with writers of the Black Arts Movement, who sought to embrace Black history, challenge Western artistic conventions, and more authentically depict the experiences of ordinary Black people. The movement, which was inspired by both the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the earlier the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, included writers and artists such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, and Etheridge Knight. "Women" reflects some of the aims of the movement, in that it explores the experiences of Black women that have all too often been overlooked, minimized, and erased by the dominant white society.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alice Walker was born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. Her parents, Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker, were poor sharecroppers: people who rented small plots from a landowner in exchange for a portion of their crops each year. This system was one of many technically legal mechanisms used to oppress and economically exploit Black people in the generations after slavery was officially abolished. Although becoming sharecroppers allowed many to feed their families and survive, it also kept them indebted to white landowners and perpetuated a cycle of poverty and economic stagnation.

Walker herself came of age during the civil rights movement, at a time when many activists were becoming more aware of the ways in which art could be used to inspire and mobilize ordinary people into action. Walker became particularly interested in representing and uplifting the experiences of Black women, who were too often left out of white-led feminist movements and overlooked by Black men championing racial equality.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a recording of "Women." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg70V9NGYKM)
- Learn More About Alice Walker — A biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-walker)
- A Brief Description of Walker's First Book of Poems — Read a description of the poems in Once, in which "Women" first appeared. (https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2010/09/book-poetry-once-1968/)
- Writer's Symposium by the Sea with Alice Walker — A 2020 interview with the poet in which she discusses her writing, love, freedom, and societal change. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScUgSvtFFmo)
- Alice Walker Looks Back on Life — A New York Times article exploring Walker's legacy, the publication of her diaries, and her sometimes contentious stances on various social issues. (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/books/alice-walker-book.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALICE WALKER POEMS

- Poem at Thirty-Nine

HOW TO CITE

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