

# Culture clash: the struggle with racial identity in "strong horse tea"



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Community is as life sustaining as food and water. It provides human connection, a sense of identity, and support. However, human nature leads individuals to seek experiences separate from their communities. In Alice Walker's story "Strong Horse Tea", Rannie goes a step further, rejecting her community in search of validation from a different one. She believes that connection to white society will come only through the rejection of her black identity. This belief leads to her mistrust of Sarah's medicine. The mailman, who gives the reader white society's perspective, shows white culture's disinterest in Rannie's struggle. After white society fails her, Rannie gives herself completely to black tradition, allowing Sarah to practice her medicine on Snooks. However, her initial resistance to her community destroys her opportunity to save her child. Cultural division makes Snooks's death inevitable. Through Rannie's struggle with community identity, Walker illustrates the consequences of cultural division.

Rannie's rejection of Sarah's traditional medicine shows her subconscious desire to separate herself from pain that stems from her black identity. Through her invalidation of Sarah, shown in her statement, "I don't believe in none of that swamp magic" (Walker 477), Rannie attempts to gain superiority over the rest of the black community. This desire for superiority stems from Rannie's internalized mistrust of black tradition caused by white culture's assertion of values on her community. The circulars represent the shift of Rannie's trust from her community to another. They represent the wealth and way of life of white people. Her request of more circulars "to paper the inside of her house to keep out the wind" (Walker 478) illuminates her belief that white way of life has the ability to save and protect her. The

papers not only insulate her from the cold of winter, but also fuel her hope that white society will acknowledge and relieve her suffering.

The mailman who brings the circulars reveals the futility of this hope. The shifts of perspective to the mailman conveys the disconnect between Rannie's perception of herself and white culture's perception of her. Rannie's question "Who'd go and ignore a little sick baby like my snooks?" (Walker 477) shows her belief that denial of black culture will prove sufficient in gaining empathy from the white world. The mailman, Rannie's delegate from white society, describes Rannie as looking "so pitiful hanging there in the rain" (Walker 479), showing that the best white people have to offer the black community is pity. His choice to bring Sarah to heal Snooks instead of the white doctor reveals the inadequacy of pity in inspiring sacrifice. Pity in place of empathy shows the deep chasm between the two races, which leads to white society's complete rejection of Rannie.

Rannie's eventual acceptance of Sarah's medicine establishes the necessity of community dependence. Sarah tells Rannie "I's the doctor child-that there mailman didn't git no further with that message than the road in front of my house" (Walker 480). Hearing this statement, Rannie's view of white society as her savior diminishes. Her acceptance of white apathy allows her recognize "the time she had wasted waiting for the real doctor" (Walker 481). This realization brings the severity of the rift between races into stark light. Masked by her hope for white acknowledgement lies the truth: she will only find compassion and charity from other black people. The mailman's betrayal forces Rannie to shift her trust back to black tradition. She not only allows Sarah to practice her medicine on Snooks, but commits to it

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completely through her panicked collection of the “strong horse tea”. The disgusting, humiliating nature of this act shows her complete dedication to Sarah. Despite this desperate action, Snooks’ illness progresses past the point of healing. Rannie becomes a victim of the conflict between white and black culture. White society sacrifices nothing to help her and causes Rannie’s rejection of black tradition, proving itself as the true antagonist in Rannie’s story.

Snooks’s inevitable death reveals the suffering that results from the divide between white and black culture. Rannie’s dismissal of Sarah illustrates her wish to distance herself from her own community. She hopes distance will create space for connection between her and white society, but the mailman’s perception of Rannie deems any connection impossible. Rannie eventually realizes this, and gives her trust completely to Sarah and black tradition. But her inability to save her child shows that any separation from one’s community leads to tragedy. Even strong horse tea cannot mend the broken relationship between white and black culture.