

Everyday Use By Alice Walker Analysis

ALICE WALKER Everyday use

Summary: In "Everyday Use," Mama, the story's first person narrator, describes her relationship to her daughter Dee as Dee, an educated young African-American woman, returns to visit her childhood house in the Deep South. The story begins as Mama and Maggie, Dee's sister and Mama's younger daughter, prepare for the visit. Maggie changes her clothes as Mama fantasizes about reconciling with her daughter on a television show hosted by someone like Johnny Carson. Mama then dismisses her fantasy as unrealistic, because she believes she is not the kind of person who would appear on such a show.

As she waits for Dee, Mama looks around the yard and at Maggie, triggering memories of Dee's troubled childhood in their house—her anger towards her family and their poverty, her hunger for higher quality clothes and an education, her charisma, assertiveness, and her beauty. Mama thinks about how Dee's attitude towards them changed as she became educated thanks to money from Mama and the Church, turning her from hateful to hurtfully condescending. As she remembers Dee as a child, Mama contrasts her with Maggie—a diffident, kind, homely young woman with a scar on her face from the house fire. Mama recounts the traumatizing fire, which burnt down their home, and forced them to build a new one, exactly like it, where they now live.

At last Dee and her partner, Hakim-a-Barber, arrive at the house. Dee is dressed in a beautiful, colorful, floor-length dress in African style. She introduces herself as "Wangero," not as Dee, stating that she changed her name so she would not be named after her "oppressors." Mama is originally skeptical of both these choices, but decides that she likes the dress. Mama reminds Dee that she is, in fact, named after her aunt Dicie, but agrees to call Dee by her chosen name.

Everyday Use by Alice Walker analysis delves into the complexities of identity, heritage, and familial relationships within the African American experience. This short story, published in 1973, highlights the contrasting values between two sisters, Dee and Maggie, and their mother, Mama, as they navigate their connections to their family's legacy and cultural heritage. By examining the characters, themes, and symbols in "Everyday Use," we can gain a deeper understanding of Walker's commentary on the significance of culture and identity.

Character Analysis

Mama

Mama, the story's narrator, is a strong, hardworking woman who embodies traditional values. She represents a direct connection to her heritage and is deeply rooted in her rural lifestyle. Her character is marked by resilience and practicality.

- Strength: Mama's physicality and work ethic reflect her strength and determination.
- Connection to Heritage: She treasures the handmade quilts and other family artifacts, which symbolize her lineage and the stories of her ancestors.

Dee (Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo)

Dee, the elder sister, embodies a more modern and assertive approach to identity. She has undergone a transformation that involves changing her name and embracing a new cultural identity.

- Rejection of Heritage: Dee's desire to adopt an African name indicates her rejection of her immediate family heritage in favor of a broader cultural identity.
- Materialism: Her interest in the family's heirlooms is superficial; she sees them as artifacts rather than items imbued with personal history and meaning.

Maggie

Maggie, the younger sister, is characterized by her quiet demeanor and lack of self-confidence. Unlike Dee, she embraces her heritage in a more personal and intimate way.

- Connection to the Past: Maggie understands the quilts' significance and is emotionally tied to them.
- Contrast to Dee: Her subdued personality highlights the differences between her and Dee, showcasing the spectrum of how individuals relate to their heritage.

Thematic Exploration

Heritage and Identity

One of the central themes in "Everyday Use" is the exploration of heritage and identity. Walker contrasts the ways in which different characters perceive and value their cultural history.

- Cultural Appropriation vs. Authenticity: Dee's approach to her heritage reflects a form of cultural appropriation, where she seeks to showcase her identity without understanding its roots. In contrast, Mama and Maggie embody an authentic connection to their heritage.
- Personal vs. Collective Identity: The story raises questions about whether identity should be rooted in personal experiences or collective history.

Family Dynamics

The relationship between Mama, Maggie, and Dee highlights the complexities of familial bonds and the differing perspectives within families.

- Conflict and Reconciliation: The tension between Dee and Mama represents a broader conflict within families about how to honor and preserve heritage.
- Support and Understanding: Maggie's supportive role emphasizes the importance of understanding and acceptance within family dynamics.

Women's Empowerment

Walker's narrative also touches on women's empowerment and the challenges they face within a patriarchal society.

- Mama's Strength: Mama's resilience in a male-dominated world showcases the strength of women who navigate societal expectations.
- Dee's Transformation: Dee's quest for identity reflects modern women's struggles to assert themselves in a changing world.

Symbolism in "Everyday Use"

The Quilts

The quilts serve as a powerful symbol of heritage, identity, and the connection between generations.

- Cultural Significance: Each quilt is made from scraps of clothing worn by family members, representing the family's history and experiences.
- Conflict Over Ownership: The disagreement over who should inherit the quilts underscores the differing values between Dee and Maggie regarding their family's legacy.

The House

Mama's home is another significant symbol in the story.

- Physical Manifestation of Heritage: The house, made from materials reflecting the family's labor, symbolizes the hard work and sacrifices of previous generations.
- Contrast to Modernity: Dee's disdain for the old house represents a disconnect from the past, while Mama and Maggie embrace it as a place of comfort and history.

Conclusion

In "Everyday Use," Alice Walker masterfully explores themes of heritage, identity, and family dynamics through the lens of her characters. The contrast between Mama, Dee, and Maggie illustrates a broader conversation about cultural appreciation versus appropriation, as well as the

significance of understanding one's roots. The story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of honoring the past while navigating the complexities of modern identity. Walker's narrative encourages readers to reflect on their own connections to heritage and the ways in which they choose to celebrate or distance themselves from their cultural backgrounds. By analyzing "Everyday Use," one gains valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of identity and the enduring impact of family history.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'?

The main themes in 'Everyday Use' include heritage versus modernity, the importance of cultural identity, and the dynamics of family relationships, particularly the contrast between the characters of Dee and Mama.

How does Alice Walker portray the character of Dee in 'Everyday Use'?

Dee is portrayed as a confident and assertive character who embraces a more modern interpretation of her African heritage. However, her superficial understanding of culture highlights the conflict between her and her mother, Mama, who values practical lineage over aesthetic appreciation.

What role do the quilts play in the narrative of 'Everyday Use'?

The quilts symbolize the family's heritage and the connection to their ancestors. Mama's decision to give the quilts to Maggie instead of Dee emphasizes the idea that true heritage is tied to lived experiences and practical use rather than mere display.

How does Walker use the setting to enhance the story in 'Everyday Use'?

The rural Southern setting reflects the simplicity and traditional values of Mama and Maggie's lifestyle. It contrasts with Dee's more urban and modern perspective, illustrating the divide between different interpretations of cultural heritage.

What is the significance of the story's title 'Everyday Use'?

The title 'Everyday Use' signifies the practical application of heritage in daily life. It suggests that cultural artifacts should be used and appreciated in everyday contexts, rather than being reserved for aesthetic appreciation, as Dee suggests.

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