Everyday Use By Alice Walker Sparknotes

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 is a poignant short story that delves into the complexities of cultural identity, heritage, and the varying interpretations of what it means to embrace one's roots. Set in the rural Southern United States, this narrative explores the dynamics of family relationships, particularly between a mother and her two daughters, Dee and Maggie. Through contrasting characters and their conflicting values, Walker presents a rich tapestry of themes that resonate with readers across generations.

Summary of the Story

The story is narrated by Mama, an African American woman who lives in a rural area and has a strong connection to her heritage. The narrative unfolds when Dee, her eldest daughter, arrives home after a long absence, bringing with her a new name, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, and a newfound sense of cultural pride. This visit sparks a clash between Dee and her mother, as well as with Maggie, the younger sister who has remained home to care for Mama.

Characters

Understanding the main characters is crucial for grasping the underlying themes of the story:

1. Mama: The narrator, representing the traditional values and labor of her heritage. She is a strong, practical woman who has worked hard for her family and possesses a deep connection to her roots.

2. Dee/Wangero: The ambitious daughter who seeks to reconnect with her African heritage but does so in a way that alienates her family. She embodies a more modern, superficial approach to culture.

3. Maggie: The shy and insecure younger sister who has been shaped by her difficult upbringing. She represents the quiet strength of family bonds and the true understanding of heritage.

Themes in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's narrative is rich with themes that encourage readers to reflect on the meaning of cultural identity and the importance of heritage. Some of the prominent themes include:

1. Heritage and Identity

The story raises important questions about what it means to be connected to one's heritage. Dee's desire to claim her African roots through a new name and material possessions contrasts sharply with Mama and Maggie's more practical understanding of their heritage. For Mama and Maggie, heritage is lived and experienced daily rather than displayed as an aesthetic.

2. Education and Enlightenment

Dee's education has opened her eyes to new perspectives on identity, but it has also distanced her from her family's lived experiences. Walker contrasts Dee's intellectual approach to culture with Mama and Maggie's intimate knowledge of their heritage, suggesting that true understanding comes from lived experience rather than academic learning.

3. Feminism and Empowerment

Walker also touches on themes of feminism, particularly through the character of Mama. Mama's strength and resilience as a single mother reflect the struggles and empowerment of women in their quest for identity and respect. Dee's character, while seemingly empowered, highlights the dangers of superficial feminism that neglects the foundational experiences of women like Mama and Maggie.

4. Conflict and Resolution

The conflict between Dee and her family represents broader societal tensions regarding identity and heritage. The resolution comes when Mama asserts her authority and understanding of her heritage, leading to a pivotal moment of recognition between the characters. This resolution emphasizes the value of familial bonds over materialistic interpretations of culture.

Symbols and Motifs

Walker employs various symbols and motifs to enhance the story's themes and deepen the readers' understanding of the characters' motivations.

1. The Quilts

The quilts that Mama has made symbolize the family's heritage and the act of preserving their history. Dee desires the quilts for their aesthetic value and as a token of cultural significance, but Mama intends to give them to Maggie, who understands their true meaning. This conflict over the quilts encapsulates the broader theme of heritage being more than just artifacts; it's about lived experience and personal connection.

2. The House

Mama's home, which is described as a simple and functional space, represents the roots of her identity. It contrasts with Dee's more modern and superficial understanding of beauty and culture. The house stands as a testament to the family's history and the struggles they have endured.

3. Names

Dee's decision to change her name to Wangero reflects her desire to reclaim her African heritage, but it also signifies her disconnection from her family. In contrast, Mama and Maggie's names are tied to their lineage and cultural history, emphasizing the theme of identity through names.

Critical Analysis

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" serves as a powerful commentary on the complexities of cultural identity in a modern context. The characters embody different responses to heritage, illustrating the tension between traditional values and contemporary interpretations of culture.

Character Dynamics

The relationship between Mama and her daughters is central to the story. Mama's deep-seated love for both Dee and Maggie is evident, yet her frustration with Dee's pretentiousness reveals the challenges of reconciling different interpretations of identity. Maggie's quiet strength and acceptance of her heritage highlight the importance of authenticity.

Walker's Narrative Style

Walker's use of first-person narration provides an intimate glimpse into Mama's thoughts and feelings, allowing readers to connect deeply with her character. The vivid descriptions of the setting and the characters' emotions enhance the storytelling, making the themes more relatable and poignant.

Conclusion

In "Everyday Use," Alice Walker masterfully explores the nuances of cultural identity, heritage, and the complexity of familial relationships. Through the contrasting characters of Dee, Mama, and Maggie, Walker challenges readers to reflect on their own understanding of heritage and the ways in which it can be embraced or misinterpreted. The story remains a timeless examination of the significance of roots and the everyday experiences that shape our identities. As such, Walker's work continues to resonate, prompting ongoing discussions about culture, identity, and the meaning of heritage in contemporary society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary theme of 'Everyday Use' by Alice Walker?

The primary theme of 'Everyday Use' is the conflict between different interpretations of heritage and cultural identity, particularly as it relates to the African American experience.

Who are the main characters in 'Everyday Use'?

The main characters are Mama (the narrator), Dee (also known as Wangero), and Maggie. Each character represents different attitudes towards heritage and identity.

How does Alice Walker use symbolism in 'Everyday Use'?

Walker uses several symbols, including quilts and the yard, to represent the characters' connections to their heritage. The quilts, in particular, symbolize the blending of past and present cultural identity.

What does Dee's name change signify in 'Everyday Use'?

Dee's name change to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo signifies her desire to reconnect with her African roots and reject what she perceives as her oppressive heritage, thereby highlighting her superficial understanding of culture.

How does the setting influence the story in 'Everyday Use'?

The rural Southern setting of the story emphasizes the simplicity of Mama and Maggie's lives, contrasting with Dee's urban lifestyle, and serves to highlight the themes of tradition versus modernity.

What role does Mama's perspective play in 'Everyday Use'?

Mama's perspective as the narrator provides insight into her values and experiences, allowing readers to understand the significance of heritage and the differing views held by her daughters.

How does 'Everyday Use' address the concept of family dynamics?

The story explores the complexities of family dynamics through the contrasting relationships between Mama, Maggie, and Dee, showcasing themes of love, conflict, and differing views on heritage.

What is the significance of the quilts in 'Everyday Use'?

The quilts are significant as they represent the family's history, craftsmanship, and the importance of preserving heritage. They are a tangible connection to the past, emphasizing the theme of valuing one's roots.

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