

"everyday use" from
an antipatriarchal
perspective



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" Everyday Use" from an Antipatriarchal Perspective According to feminist theory, cultural definitions of gender roles can be patriarchal or antipatriarchal (Tyson, 83-86). In the short story " Everyday Use," Alice Walker depicts her characters' gender roles as antipatriarchal in the feminist theory context. Specifically, this idea is present in Mama's physical appearance, the activities she partakes in, and her refusal to submit to authoritative figures. In addition, Walker positively depicts antipatriarchal ideology through the character of Mama, especially when she violates traditional patriarchal gender roles. Feminist theory examines the ways in which identity is molded by the cultural definitions of gender roles. According to feminist theory, there are two types of ideologies, patriarchal and antipatriarchal. In patriarchal societies, men hold all or most positions of power, while women are oppressed and have little opportunity. Patriarchal gender roles are very traditional, meaning that men are masculine, strong, powerful providers, though sometimes violent; and women tend to be feminine, submissive, nurturing, and motherly. Patriarchal thought praises individuals who embody these characteristics and condemns those who challenge them, while antipatriarchal philosophy does just the opposite (Tyson 83-85). In " Everyday Use," Mama takes on the roles of the man of the house and is praised for doing so, reflecting antipatriarchal ideas in the text (Tyson 99). She has no male provider, but Mama works hard to care for her family. She takes on the role of the head of the house and tends to stereotypically masculine duties, embodying the traditional gender roles of a man. The opening line of the story is, " I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon," (Walker 274) and immediately paints a picture of Mama's ability to do manual labor.

Walker goes on to illustrate the importance of keeping a good, clean yard, as it is "like an extended living room" (Walker 274), thereby praising Mama for her efforts. The strong, violent nature of traditional male gender roles is evident in Mama. In the text she describes some of the activities she partakes in: "I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man...I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire in minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall" (275). Mama's actions and her success in performing traditionally male duties to provide for her family require her to be powerful, both physically and emotionally, and force her to embrace a violent nature, rather than a motherly, nurturing one. Mama's physical appearance is also very masculine. She refers to herself as "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" (275) who chews tobacco and wears overalls to work in during the day and pajamas made of flannel at night, which are clothes generally worn by working men. In the story, Walker suggests that Mama does not think of herself as beautiful. She believes her daughter would like her to be "a hundred pounds lighter... [with] skin like an uncooked barley pancake" (275). Rather than be oppressed by these patriarchal ideas of society, Mama rises above them, and is confident of what she is able to accomplish on her own. In "Everyday Use", Dee also embodies masculine roles by taking the place of Mama's absent husband. Dee attends school and is well educated, a freedom rarely attained by women during that time. She refuses to be "oppressed" by a name that was given to her family by slave owners, which cause her to reject her heritage and feel a sense of superiority over her

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family. Dee believes she is entitled to the family quilts because she is educated. However, Mama believes otherwise. Mama claims to have already promised Dee's desired quilts to Maggie. Dee argues that Maggie cannot appreciate them and therefore she fights for the "priceless" artifacts. Atypical of patriarchal society, Mama refuses to submit to Dee, who is a masculine figure. In stories with a more patriarchal point of view, women are often forced to give in to authoritative tormenters, but Mama takes stands up for herself. By applying feminist theory to Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," it is possible to examine the cultural definitions of gender roles as formed by patriarchal or antipatriarchal ideas. In the short story, Mama participates in activities typically performed by men, has a traditionally masculine physical appearance, and refuses to submit to authoritative figures. According to traditional patriarchal ideology, mothers should be feminine, nurturing, motherly, and submissive, yet Walker depicts Mamas just the opposite. Mama defies everything a traditional woman should be, according to patriarchal beliefs, but Walker celebrates her. Therefore, "Everyday Use" exemplifies antipatriarchal ideology.

Works Cited
Tyson, Lois. "Using Concepts from Feminist Theory to Understand Literature." *Learning for a Diverse World: Using Critical Theory to Read and Write about Literature*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001. 83-85. Print.
Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *Learning For a Diverse World: Using Critical Theory to Read and Write about Literature*. Ed. Lois Tyson. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001. 274-81. Print.