

Everyday use analysis

Business



Ellen Johnson Mr. Roberts AP English 4 13 Apr 2010 Dee: the Sister Who Lost Her Identity Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a short story about the clash between a mother and daughter. Dee is the child returning home to visit. The visit is not exactly pleasant and ends after a stand-off between her and Mama.

Many readers see Mama as finally standing up for her own ideals while also refusing to conform to the rules Dee wishes her to follow. Dee follows different rules of society and religion than her mother does in order to become her own person.

The rules Dee follows are shallow compared to the old-fashioned ways of her mother. In "Everyday Use", Walker tells a story of a child who believes her mother's views to be old-fashioned and considers herself to be more in touch with her culture. Author Flannery O'Connor has written numerous short stories containing issues similar to these issues: This plot line and character type can be found in a number of O'Connor short stories, for example, 'Good Country People,' 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' and 'The Enduring Chill.

O'Connor ends these stories with an epiphanic awareness on the part of the arrogant intellectual of his or her true fragility, thereby providing, too, a more positive view of the parent (in comparison to her child). (Bauer) Bauer points out that Dee too is an arrogant intellectual and has chosen to follow faulty values that only allow her to make poor choices. O'Connor's arrogant intellectuals are similar to Dee, and O'Connor's positively viewed parents are likened to Mama (Bauer).

To continue this relationship, both O'Connor and Walker provide their readers with accounts of characters facing complex situations, as well as an insight to typical Southern lifestyles, while finalizing their pieces with the parents in a positive light and the child seen as misguided (Bauer). Dee wishes to promote her heritage proudly to the point of bragging.

Instead of using the quilt to keep warm or for "everyday use", she wants to hang it up on a wall as if it were in a showcase in a museum. Dee says: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts! (Walker 94). Finally, Dee's mother asks her "Well... [w]hat would you do with them?" and Dee replies promptly "Hang them...[a]s if that was the only thing you could do with quilts" (Walker 94). Walker uses these quotes to reinforce the idea that Dee believes it is more acceptable, and therefore better, to view your heritage at a distance. View it as a fragile artifact that is part of a museum collection, an artifact that shows how far you have come from where you started, rather than to embrace it and allow it to become part of yourself.

Dee refuses to see herself as a part of the life she had once lived. She has become her own person. She has lost a true understanding of her heritage. She refuses to see herself as a part of her former life except in a fashionable sense. This explains the reason she chooses to return home.

She returns home not to catch up with her mother, but to take things from her past and fashion them for her own uses. When she takes photographs, she makes sure to get the house in the picture and even a cow from the pasture (Walker 92).

This is all done to prove to others that her background really was humble. This will be something she will want to show off to her friends. Dee wants the butter churn as another artifact to brag about. She thinks the lid to the butter churn will be a fabulous center piece for their dining room table (Walker 93).

She could tell her friends how the artifact dates back to her great-grandmother's time (Walker 93). Although Dee wishes to appear knowledgeable about her background, it is clear that she is not.

Susan Farell takes notice of Dee's "false or shallow understanding of the past" and states that Walker exposes this when Dee mentions to Mama that she wants the dasher to the butter churn. Dee's lack of knowledge is revealed when Hakim-a-barber asks if "Uncle Buddy whittle[d] that too", but Dee is clueless and must look to her mother for an answer (Farell). It is fashionable for Dee to claim her family used to use a churn to make butter and still better to have the relic to prove her humble roots.

To prove further the point that Dee only embraces her past for the stylish ense, Walker describes how "Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made...she had a style of her own and she knew what style was" (90). Her mother is not pretentious and follows a more traditional set of rules and wears clothes more sensible for living in a farmhouse. Mama thinks to herself, "[i]n the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day" (Walker 90). Yet Dee's style changes with the changing times and she has just adopted the current fashion.

Houston Baker writes, “[a]ssured by the makers of American fashion that ‘black’ is currently ‘beautiful,’ she has conformed her own ‘style’ to that notion.” So when she goes to visit her mother, the first thing Mama notices about Dee’s appearance is her newly adopted African style: A dress to the ground in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders.

Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits. (Walker 91) Here she is showing off her style yet again, though now the style is closer to what may have been more traditionally African. In the story Dee practically begs her mother to let her have these quilts she wants. She wants these quilts so badly because they are stitched from old pieces of clothing, and there is even a small piece “from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War” (Walker 93).

Dee sees this information as beneficial to her image of coming from a poor oppressed black family and probably imagines herself sharing the story with friends when she is asked about the quilts.

Farell states that Walker exposes Dee’s superficiality and Mama’s self-determination when Mama informs Dee that she was going to give the quilts to her Maggie. Dee is shocked and begins yelling at Mama (Walker 94). She attacks her mother’s idea of giving them to her younger sister by exclaiming:

“[b]ut they’re priceless...Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they’d be in rags” (Walker 94).

This is an ironic contrast to what she told her mother previously when Dee was offered the quilts. “ I didn’t want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college.

Then she had told me they were old fashioned, out of style” (Walker 94). Walker put these phrases next to each other in the story to demonstrate Dee’s faux respect for her heritage and also to highlight her true intentions of using the quilts as a fashion statement. Dee is also trying to be more authentically black by dating a black Muslim.

This is the man that Mama meets and calls “ Asalamalakim”, otherwise known as Hakim-a-barber (Walker 92). However, it is clear that he, just like Dee, only follows the rules that he wants to follow. He is not truly embracing the Muslim heritage because he is picking and choosing the parts of the religion that he wants to follow.

He doesn’t raise cattle, a common custom of Muslims, but he does follow the custom of not eating pork. Hakim-a-barber states, “ I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style” (Walker 93).

Although he shuns the tradition of cattle raising, he does, however, follow the Muslim rule of not eating pork (Walker 93). While Dee tries to surround herself by people whom she thinks appear more authentic, she is also trying to make herself seem more authentic in any way possible; this is why she

changes her name to “ Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo” (Walker 92). However, this only separates her more from her heritage.

Sam Whitsitt claims that the name Wangero was an African name Dee picked out.

Dee only picked out this African name so that she would seem more authentic, but Margaret Bauer suggests that the name Dee is, in actuality, the more authentic name because it has been in their family since the time of the Civil War. Throughout the whole story Dee insists on acting as if she truly understands and appreciates her background. However, by the end of the story, she has only proved herself to be a phony who is desperate to have family heirlooms that she cannot truly appreciate, and unscrupulous in her battle for them. Works Cited Baker Jr. , Houston A.

; Pierce-Baker, Charlotte. (1990