

Research paper on passion and tradition

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



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Alice Walker is an influential writer who expressed her passion for tradition and heritage in the compelling short story, *Everyday Use*. This critically acclaimed tale is set in the rural South of the 1960s, a backdrop against which Mrs. Johnson and her daughters, Dee and Maggie, play out a parable about the struggle for cultural integrity and of remaining true to one's nature. In *Everyday Use*, Walker would have us understand that keeping faith with oneself is the best way to maintain a link to the past.

Background

For Walker, that past can be traced to her native Georgia. One of eight children, her sharecropper parents struggled against the Jim Crow laws of the segregationist South. A childhood accident left her with a permanently disfigured eye, a scar both physical and psychological with which she struggled for years. Walker escaped the insecurity of her deformity by indulging in her family's rich oral traditions, a powerful source of inspiration and imagination for her fiction. *Everyday Use* is a story that draws heavily on her early life. Walker overcame her self-consciousness to become

valedictorian of her high school class and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1965 (White 102).

Struggle for identity, fight for justice there is a strong sense of place and history in *Everyday Use*. It is the foundation for the story's fundamental conflict between Mrs. Johnson and her daughter, Dee, who has assumed a manufactured African identity that has nothing to do with her own family background (Hoel). Walker herself has embraced her African ethnicity but in her writing stresses that one's personal history offers a source of strength that shouldn't be taken for granted. " I do in fact have an African name that was given to me, and I love it and use it when I want to, and I love my Kenyan gowns and my Ugandan gowns – the whole bit – it is part of me. But...my parents and grandparents were part of (her background) and they take precedence" (Walker and Christian 101-102).

Walker is keenly interested in race and stereotyping, in the effect they have on the way African-American women see themselves and interact with family. She " challenges the stereotypes of women, especially of older women within black societies, as well as the racism these women must confront within white societies (Walker and Christian 12). Mrs. Johnson is, in a sense, a rejection of the stereotypically docile black woman, quietly and dutifully fulfilling her domestic role. In *Everyday Use*, Mrs. Johnson's protectiveness toward the family quilt is an act born of instinct and emotion, a denial of the affected, pretentious path her elder daughter has taken. The quilt is profoundly symbolic for Walker, representing the tradition that links

generations past with the present. Mrs. Johnson instinctively defends this link, denying the quilts to Dee who has

adopted the African name “Wangero,” giving them instead to her younger daughter, Maggie, who has remained true to her heritage. Mrs. Johnson’s action is “in keeping with her own knowledge of the meaning of the quilts, the spirit that they embody, and her need to make decisions based upon her own values” (Walker and Christian 12).

Environment and pathos

Walker employs an affectingly sad and bittersweet pathos in *Everyday Use*. One feels empathy for Dee, who in her own shallow way is trying to connect with the past, though in a way her mother cannot approve of or understand. Her efforts to embody an idealized African past at the expense of her own recent African-American history was a common phenomenon in the Afrocentric movement of that era (Walker and Christian 11). Dee adorns herself in obscure African dress, changes her name and, in an oddly comic exchange, her non-plussed mother and sister look on as Dee greets the “short stocky fellow with the hair to his navel” a hearty, “Wa-su-zo-Tean-o,” a Ugandan phrase meaning simply “Good Morning” (Walker 28). One senses the mortification that Mrs. Johnson and Maggie feel at Dee’s awkward assumption of an identity they cannot relate to and that does not truly represent the family’s heritage.

The search for identity is one that Alice Walker understands well. She grew up in the era of segregation and came of age during the Civil Rights movement, a period of American history in which black women were caught

between two powerful cultural biases. Her struggle against black and female stereotypes proved a powerful influence on her development as a writer. But one of the most interesting elements of her work is a sense of cultural ambiguity, reflected in her support for, and criticism of, the Black Power movement and the ways in which it oppressed black women. Her visit to Africa during college opened her eyes to the disconnect between the Black Power movement's idealization of Africa and the reality of life there (Walker and Christian 13). " This was not the ' motherland' of pyramid-laden splendor, proud warriors, and majestic queens that, by the mid-1960s, was being vaunted by black radicals wearing dashikis and pounding conga drums on American street corners. The polluted waters, hunger of the elders, tear-stained cheeks...would forever tarnish the glory of Mt. Kenya and stain Alice's memories of her first pilgrimage to Africa" (White 111).

Influence and legacy

Alice Walker's remarkable literary legacy is to be found in the timeless works that have earned her such renown. *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*...these are the media through which Walker's passion for equality, economic justice and the preservation of cultural heritage honors the struggle of women and African-Americans. But the success of her writings and the causes she championed on behalf of the dispossessed never separated her from her principles even in the face of fierce criticism. Ultimately, this may stand as her most impressive accomplishment.

As an African-American, she didn't step back from portraying black male violence in *The Color Purple*. " Alice Walker (was denounced) as a subversive for daring to make public the barbarity of black men" (White 456). As a woman, she didn't shy away from an admittedly semi-autobiographical depiction of a superficial woman in *Everyday Use*. The honesty she's shown her readers, to those who admire her political views and to herself has set her apart as a uniquely introspective artist and social activist.

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