

"everyday use" and "sadie and maud" essay example

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African American Deracination and its Presentation in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Gwendolyn Brooks' "Sadie and Maud"

It could be argued that the whole experience of African Americans in the U. S. A. is one of forced and violent deracination. African Americans are doubly, triply, deracinated and without roots. Violently uprooted from Africa, they entered a system of slavery in which, at the whim of their owners, they could be uprooted again and separated from children, lovers and family. In the period following the American Civil War many African -Americans moved north to find work in the north's industrial cities - thus becoming geographically uprooted yet again. It is no wonder that deracination - the sense of being without real roots - should be a central part of the African American experience in North America. If you are without roots, then the question of your heritage becomes hazy and ill-defined: without roots, it may be hard to identify a genuine sense of heritage. In 'Everyday Use' by Alice Walker and 'Sadie and Maud' by Gwendolyn Brooks, the rootless nature of the African American experience is presented in very different and contrasting ways, despite some superficial similarities between the two texts.

Both Brooks and Walker explore these questions of deracination and heritage through the presentation of two sisters who differ greatly from each other. It should also be remembered that Brooks and Walker are writing in two different genres: Brookes in poetry and Walker in prose fiction. Another important difference is the date of publication. "'Sadie and Maud'" was published in 1945, but "Everyday Use" was published in book form in 1973 -

after the relative success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The contrast between each pair of sisters is similar in some ways: Maud and Dee/Wangero have both been to college and have bettered themselves: through education they could both be seen as having left their humble origins and moved into what we might call the African American middle class. Sadie and Maggie have no such educational opportunities, but are presented very differently - although both might be said to represent archetypes of the African American female experience, despite their completely different lives.

Maud and Dee/Wangero have received an education, but the outcomes for their lives are very different. It is clear that Dee lives in the north and is relatively affluent; her partner seems financially successful and has converted to Islam. However, the price of Dee's upward social mobility is her attitude of condescension to her mother and to her sister, Maggie - left back at the ramshackle family home in the South. Dee is truly deracinated from her roots in America - the roots of the poor, rural south and the legacy of slavery, because she has been successful; her obsession with Africa - shown by her hair style, her name-change and her attitude to the quilts, is a desperate search for identity and roots, but involves turning her back on her real heritage: Walker makes it clear that Dee has not visited Ma and Maggie for many years. By contrast, Maud too has been to college and tried to find success through bettering herself, but, perhaps because of limited job opportunities for African American women in 1945 when the story was published, she ends up "living all alone" (Brooks, line 19) in the family house - which, paradoxically, is likely to be Maggie's fate in "Everyday Use".

The importance of the era of production is vital here: Dee has more opportunities because of the Civil Rights Movement.

The other sisters are essentially similar - they do not have access to education and they both stay at home - but what happens to them is completely different. Sadie has two children although she is not married, is more concerned with her appearance and is lively and attractive: Brooks describes her as "one of the livingest chits/In all the land (lines 7 - 8). By the end of the poem, however, Sadie and her two children have left home - abandoning her parents and (it is implied) breaking off all contact with her parents who "Nearly died of shame" (line 12).

This pattern of family behaviour amongst African Americans exists only because the system of slavery encouraged the deliberate separation of families groups and did not allow slaves to go through a formal marriage ceremony. By contrast, Maggie stays at home because she is shy, retiring and lacks any sense of self-esteem because of her facial injuries suffered in the fire at the original family home. She has not had the educational opportunities offered to Dee, nor has she embraced the carefree lifestyle of Sadie - probably because of her appearance and reserved personality. In terms of her future life, she has more in common with Maud and would seem destined to spend the rest of her life in the poverty of the family house she shares with Ma.

Brooks uses the word "heritage" jokingly, when she writes that Sadie "left as heritage/Her fine-tooth comb." (lines 15 - 16) However, heritage in "Everyday Use" has a much more central importance and Walker explores

different interpretations or different ideas as to what 'heritage' is available to African Americans. Towards the end of the story, Dee says to her mother, "You just don't understand... your heritage" (Walker, 55), but Walker presents Dee's view as ironic (for reasons which will be discussed below). It is Dee, who is obsessed with her distant African past and who has little time for her American heritage - despite the pains and traumas of that heritage - who does not fully understand her heritage. Dee would like to forget her real roots in the isolated, poor, rural south and find a substitute sense of roots in a distant Africa - distant geographically and in time. Dee would hang the quilts on the wall as ornamental trophies; Maggie, by contrast, will use them as quilts and, moreover, knows how to make them, and is thus closer to her real roots. Dee's behaviour towards her mother and Maggie throughout the story is condescending and patronizing. At the very end she says,

You really ought to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it.
(Walker, 55)

Dee is right in one sense: the Civil Rights Movement did allow some African Americans to rise socially, but Dee is also profoundly mistaken because Mama and Maggie are trapped in the cycle of poverty and deprivation of the rural South.

The way Brooks and Walker write is important too in shaping the readers' reactions to the two different texts. Brooks seems to write as herself and thus keeps a distance from her characters, Maud and Sadie. She also adopts a very simple poetic form - the ballad stanza - and from a distance tells,

very succinctly, the simple story of what happened to the two sisters. She does not guide the readers' response - although we might note the irony that Maud who attempts to better herself is left lonely and isolated at the end of the poem, unable to work, despite her college education, presumably because of racist attitudes in America. Sadie may not be a complex character but she seems to have more fun - although Brooks is careful not to judge either of her characters. The ballad form with its simple, predictable rhymes and repetitive rhythm gives a slightly, light-hearted tone to "Sadie and Maud," despite the seriousness of the subject matter. Walker writes in a completely different way. Because she uses Ma to narrate the story, she controls the readers' emotional responses: we sympathize and empathize with Ma and that is why we feel irony in Dee's words and attitudes. Ma's words and actions guide the reader to feel in a certain way, so that towards the end of the story, when Ma snatches the quilts from Dee to give them to Maggie, we understand completely why she acts as she does and are likely to approve of her actions. The distance Brooks keep from Maud and Sadie does not allow us to react in the same way - to either sister.

On the subject of the quilts Cowart says;

The quilts that Wangero covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus they represent the larger African American past. The quilts contain scraps of dresses worn by the grandmother and even the great-grandmother, as well as a piece of the uniform worn by the great-grandfather who served in the Union Army in the War between the States. The visitor rightly recognizes the quilts as part of a fragile heritage, but she fails to see the extent to which she herself has traduced that heritage. (172)

She has traduced or betrayed her heritage by being cut off from her real American slave roots and seeking alternative roots in a dimly-conceived and romanticized African past. She has “ escaped the ghetto” (Coward, 172), but is deracinated from all the past generations of African Americans in America. In one sense Walker is criticizing the fashion amongst African Americans during the 60s and 70s to “ re-discover” their African roots. Cowart points out that W. E. B. Du Bois and Eldridge Cleaver were two prominent African Americans who returned to live in Africa in the 60s, and the popular success of Haley’s Roots (1976) indicates the fad for Africa amongst African Americans. (Coward, 173). We can interpret Maud’s going to college as an attempt to “ escape the ghetto” - either by assimilation or autonomy, but her effort is doomed to failure in the 1940s, prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

These two very different texts both deal with the themes of deracination and heritage, but they differ greatly in genre and presentation, and in historical context - nearly thirty years of history separates them and those thirty years were momentous and life-changing years for African Americans. However, the problems concerning assimilation, autonomy and deracination, remain broadly the same in reality, although Brooks and walker treat them in different ways.

Works Cited

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