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Throughout her short story, "Everyday Use," Walker presents the recurring theme of harmony and conflicts. The story gives an insight into the struggles of the African - American people through the characters of Mrs. Johnson, Dee and Maggie. Arguably, "Everyday Use" delves into the issue of the changes that occur when individuals in rural areas become educated. Much of the events surround the actions of the only educated Johnson. Dee gains a formal education, but when she faces her past, one sees that this formal education brings out her innate, self-centered qualities. Nancy Tuten writes of Mrs. Johnson "awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage," (as cited by Farrel, p. 179). The reader sees the remarkable differences in the way the two daughters relate to their heritage. Walker uses the symbolism of the quilt and characterization Dee and Maggie to emphasize the dissimilarities in the interpretations of the African - American society.

Despite sharing the same cultural background, Dee sees her African-American heritage as a piece of art to exhibit; while Maggie sees it as a legacy to pass from generation to generation. Walker clearly presents these two interpretations of the African-American culture as reinforces Cowart's views of the dilemma of African - American "who in trying to escape the prejudice and poverty, risk a terrible deracination from all that sustain and define them," (Cowart, 171) as a people. Similarly, literary critic, Joe Sarnowski points out "the story dramatizes both the ordinary and the extraordinary that help [the reader] to understand," (Sarnowski, p. 270) the Afro-American culture. Conversely, the author shows the commonality of family disputes which stems from the importance of the quilts and the

impact of heritage on one's way of life. Walker "write[s] of the value of the quilts in the Afro-American experience," (Whitsitt, p. 443). In the story, the quilt symbolizes the African-American heritage and its role as a daily reminder of the traditional values of the people. In fact, Maggie and Mrs. Johnson show the way art teaches the lessons of one's heritage as the lessons divide the people. The major conflict in the story centers on Dee's misunderstanding of the value of the quilt. Through this misunderstanding, the reader sees that education does not guarantee "educated" responses to life's lessons. In fact, the quilts symbolize that the African American heritage is more than a display of the culture; instead, it is a daily traditional experience.

In essence, Walker uses the quilt to show that cultural and self-preservation is important to the understanding of a people. This self-preservation is integral to the concept of self-identification of each societal group's. Walker uses Dee to show that not everyone possesses the ability or drive to embrace self. In fact, Dee loses her identity to a deeper force of African culture. The reader can identify with her actions as she goes back to her deep African roots and changes even her name. What is not clear though is the way Dee embraces the deep African traditions, but loses sight of the rich culture that comes from knowledge of the quilts. One could argue that Walker does this deliberately to show the readers "that Mama's views of her daughters are not to be accepted uncritically," (Farrell, 179).

The metaphor of quilting allows the quilt to become a focal point of conflict in the story. Sam Whitsitt writes "the violence of the metaphor is that it tends to cover over the very differences that make it possible," (Whitsitt, p.

445). Dee sees the quilts as a priceless object that should be preserved and displayed. Mrs. Johnson and Maggie see the quilts as a priceless memory of the past. One can easily support the way Whitsitt's views the quilt as " a trope whose analogue (the quilt itself) provides the stitch that untropes the trope," (p. 445) in the Johnson's family. The reader recognizes that Maggie's knowledge of the quilts stems from the perspective of an uneducated individual. But, it is her understanding and acceptance of the value of the quilt that leads the reader to appreciate the values of learning from the past. A number of critics argue that the quilt is more than a social pastime that comes down through the generations. In reality, the quilt serves as a " woman's social, economic, and political activity," (Whitsitt, p. 445). Walker looks closely at the relationship between women of different generations and how these women endure the African-American legacy. The quilt represents " disparate pieces of cloth [that] gets stitched together," (Whitsitt, p. 445), and clearly shows " herstory, history, and tradition [as it binds] women and men to the past and the past to the present," (Whitsitt, p. 445). While this link to between the generations is as firm as the quilt, Dee's arrival and her limited perception of her heritage shows that the connection between the generations is a vulnerable as the unraveling of the quilt. Aunt Dicie and Mama represent the strength of the bond of the quilt through a shared heritage. On the other hand, Maggie's and Dee's relationship shows how easy it is to destroy the fabrics of history. Interestingly, Walker uses the two sets of relationship to show that the African-American heritage stems from more than simple family bonds and relationships. In fact, it incorporates the cultural values of the people as a whole.

A number of literary critics note that Dee does not understand the value of the quilts. She does not grasp the rich cultural heritage of her ancestors who wore the very fabrics that make up the quilts. For over a century, her ancestors wore the fabrics the very pieces of fabrics of the quilt, but all she sees is the physical beauty of the fabrics. Nevertheless, Farrell notes that even though “Dee is certainly insensitive and selfish she nevertheless offers a view of heritage and a strategy for contemporary African Americans to cope with [the] oppressive society,” (Farrell, p. 179) that Mama and Maggie cannot understand.

The quilts represent living pieces of history that document the problems and happiness of many generations. In other words, the quilts act as a testimony to one’s history of hardships and pride. Whitsitt writes “Walker was not the first to write about quilts, [but] she was one of the first to write of the value of the quilt in the Afro-American experience,” (Whitsitt, p. 443). Walker uses each of her characters to show the value of the quilt and how different individuals perceive the quilt. Mama sees her personal history represented in the quilt, and therefore, considers it as one of her little treasures. She keeps these handicrafts in her house as a reminder of her rich heritage. Although she had no financial inheritance from her ancestors, the quilts represents the value she places in the past. Kathleen Wilson reiterates the view and writes “the quilts represent the Johnson’s connection to their community,” (Wilson, p. 40). The readers see that the Dee has no interest in the historical value of the quilt, but Maggie connects to the quilt to the people in her heritage. Clearly, Dee wants to remove herself from her past and just as one can tear the pieces of quilt with careless use, Dee carelessly tears herself from her

past and assumes the role of Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo.

Walker focuses on characterizing Mrs. Johnson as Dee's mother and the narrator. She uses Mama Language to show the relationship between the physical surroundings and Mama. Mrs. Johnson fearfully awaits her daughter, Dee "in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy," ("Everyday Use," p. 462). The reader sees that the physical features of the yard and the gratification in the yard. To the African-American, a home signifies stability, and Walker shows Mama in the comfort of her home as she waits for her daughter. The attachment to the yard also points Maggie's and Mama's daily practices in their home. The yard is not the typical yard, but is an "extended living room" ("Everyday Use," p. 462). This confirms for the reader that the yard represents a property and a kind of expression for Mrs. Johnson's life. Through Mrs. Johnson personal description, the reader sees that she is comfortable with her surroundings and self. She notes that she is "large, big-boned with rough, man-working hands," ("Everyday Use," 462), still she accepts that because of her fat, she stays s warm when the time is cold. One can say that Mrs. Johnson is comfortable with herself as a person and she embraces who she is and her culture. This acceptance of self is in direct contrast to Dee's need to change into a "new" person.

Walker uses the relationship between Maggie and Dee to show the psychological ways individuals react to their past. Although Maggie and Dee share the same mother, Dee and Maggie are like day and night. Both characters represent Sarnowski's view that "there are two sides to the typical American character and these two opposite sides," (Sarnowski, p. 270) present conflicting end results. Dee represents the opposite sides of

one character. She knows her African-American heritage, but she willingly aspires to adapt to the deeper aspects of the African culture. In fact, she has no care of the psychological and physical impact that the changes can have on her family, and shows that she represents the cruelty of humans towards their people.

Tuten notes, that in much of Walker's work, a character's dawning sense of self stems from the acquisition of an individual's voice, and the integration into the community, (Tuten, 125). Both Dee and Maggie find their proverbial voice in the story. Yet, the voices of the two characters reflect different views of their heritage. Dee wants to get away from her African-American culture, but Maggie's contrasting voice shows an acceptance of her heritage. The daughter who uses her voice to over-power others and separate herself from her heritage becomes silent when Mama gives the quilt to Maggie.

Walker presents the difference in the sisters' physical appearance by portraying a beautiful Dee as opposed to a disfigured Maggie. Dee is a good-looking young woman. She is fashionable and has a "nicer hair, neat-looking feet and a fuller figure," (Everyday Use," p. 463). In contrast, Maggie has scars across her entire body and is thin and not as beautiful as her sister. The reader sees that she drags her feet and hunches her back as she walks "as a dog that was ran by a car." Additionally, the author unequivocally states the personality differences between these two main characters, comes from the mother's perspective. Dee is confident, educated, determined and represents someone without uncertainty; still, she is selfish, materialistic, and set in her ways. On the other hand, Maggie is the complete opposite. She is shy, anxious, unconfident, ashamed, yet, humble

and pure of nature.

The differences in the physical appearances of the sisters show the differences in the African - American heritage. Dee physical appearance represents the positive impact of the cultural changes on the people; while Maggie's physical scars represent the hardships that the blacks faced in the past. The readers see that Dee is the object of admiration, jealousy, and disturbance in her family as she searches to find meaning in her sense. Dee is hypercritical and this affects Maggie and Mama. Their desire for Dee's acceptance is quite emotional. Mama dreams of a televised encounter. But, Dee does not attempt to try to win Maggie's or Mama's approval. In fact, one can say that Dee is not easily intimidated by those around her but possesses a strong level of self-confidence. However, critics note that Dee appears haughty and tactless. Mama is different from her and is quick to see that these commendable qualities as excessive and annoying.

Through Mama's character, the reader sees Dee's desire to gain knowledge as a form of annoyance. In fact, Dee asserts herself as the superior individual, and proves to the reader that she is stronger psychologically, than her sister. Unlike Maggie and Mrs. Johnson, Dee comes off as condescending, especially when she commits to visiting Maggie and Mama, despite the poor housing conditions. Farrell highlights the common beliefs of many critics when she says " Dee's education and insistence on reading to Mama and Maggie[is] further evidence of her separation from and lack of understanding of her heritage. Nancy Tuten, in her analysis of the short story, points out that it is through Mrs. Johnson, that Walker shows the vivid psychological differences between her daughters, (Tuten, p. 125). Tuten writes " Mama

[awakes] to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage," (Tuten, p. 125). It is with this understanding that Mama gives the quilt to Maggie as she realizes that Maggie understands the historical value of the quilt more than Dee. To Mama, the quilt gives Maggie her voice and establishes her self-worth. In addition, Walker uses Dee to show that "the quilt stands for a vanished past experience to which we have troubled and ambivalent cultural relationship," (Coward, 179).

Dee represents the supposed "good" in the Johnson's family as she gets the education that no other Johnson gets, but this education changes her attitude. Mrs. Johnson ensures that Dee gets an education, even though she has to collect money at her church to do so. One sees that it is the education Dee gets that divides her from her family. In fact, one sees that instead of making her into a better person, Dee "read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice," ("Everyday Use," 463). In essence, Dee embraced another culture and refuses to accept her immediate heritage.

The physical features and the actions of Dee, Maggie, and Mrs. Johnson symbolize their connection to heritage. Maggie's scars symbolize the ruthless inscriptions of the journey of her life. As a result of the scars, Maggie becomes psychologically unbalanced. Walker presents her as an anxious, maladjusted figure of wholesomeness and purity, but she is the character who shows the greatest understanding of her heritage. Her character is the foil of Dee as she is not corrupted by Dee's selfishness or multifaceted emotional needs that lead her to choose a different life. The physical scars from the fire lead to the contrast in her outer beauty to that of her sister.

Nevertheless, Walker shows that beauty is skin deep. Her scarred appearance covers her generous and sympathetic nature. Maggie lives a sheltered life and she is an uneducated introvert, but these qualities prove to be most-important in the readers understanding of the importance of family and family relationships in the story. Despite her physical handicap, Maggie shows love and comfort to her mother, and brings out the reality that education does not make a person better.

The psychological changes in Dee's name represents more than the physical changes it represents. Cowart writes " Walker contrives to make the situation of Wangero, the visitor, analogous to the cultural position of the minority writer who, disinclined to express the fate of the oppressed in language and literary structures of the oppressor," (Cowart, p. 171). Dee tells Mama that she could no longer endure the name of her oppressors. Historical evidence shows that the Blacks suffered greatly at the hands of the colonial masters, so it is not surprising that Dee's education give her an insight into the hardships that the Blacks faced. Cowart notes " Wangero's mental traveling, moreover, replicates that of an entire generation," (Cowart, p. 172) that readily accept a remote history that is less authentic than the one she learns of as a child. Dee has limitations to the aspects of her cultural background. Her need to put her heritage on display, stems from her need to show those in her immediate cultural circle that she has moved up on the social ladder. Cowart expresses Dee's true reflection of her past when he writes " Wangero has realized the dream of the oppressors: she has escaped the ghetto," (Cowart, p. 172) and therefore, she needs to show the world this fact by displaying the quilt in her home. In contrast to Maggie's simple

acceptance of name and her culture, Dee continues to move away from the imaginary psychological barriers of her culture.

In concluding, "Everyday Use" shows the different perspectives of the true meaning of heritage and the importance of momentous items. The sisters, Maggie and Dee crave the love and attention of their mother. Maggie is shy but caring and shows envy of the ease of which her sister moved through life. On the other hand, Dee is indifferent to her mother and sister and her character shows the negative impact of education on individuals. Walker uses the quilt to symbolize the bond of family, and at the same time, she shows how easily the fabric of life tears and destroys families. The quilt represents a part of history that gives the true meaning of unity in the African American culture. Both sisters cherish the quilt, but only Maggie understands that the quilt represents more than an ornamental piece. In fact, although Maggie has many physical and psychological challenges, the readers realize that she is more perceptive than her educated and selfish sister. Dee's actions have a psychological impact on her sister and leaves Maggie feeling inadequate. One can easily conclude that Walker's need to show contrast through characterization and symbolism is clear as the reader recognizes these elements through Dee, Maggie, and Mrs. Johnson.

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