

Everyday use by alice walker analysis

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In 1972, Alice Walker published “ Everyday Use” in a collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black women*. As better known “ Everyday Use” stood out of the collection, it has become one of few short stories about the conflict black Americans faced after the Civil Rights Movement; The struggle to maintain traditions, whilst embracing new-found freedom, and where the two worlds collided. Discussing the reoccurring themes, symbols and motifs through the narrator’s perception, and actions will reveal if the character, and ultimately the reader himself has grown or remained static in affect of the conflict.

As stated above, once the Civil Rights movement ended and black Americans received the rights equal to a white American, a conflict between the old world and the new world collided. The assimilation of black Americans into the American way of life, the struggle to uphold traditions, and the quest to return to original African culture is a theme in “ Everyday Use”. The narrator’s, “ Mama”, perception of the world is small, in contrast to her daughter’s, “ Dee”. When Dee returns, she has attempted to re-forged her African based culture and dismissed her history and “ The people who oppress me” (Walker 454).

She arrives bejeweled in gold, flaunting a flashy yellow African style dress, alongside her assumed boyfriend “ Asalamalikim”. The ignorance of Mama of this being a term in Arabic meaning “ Peace be upon you” (Anthology 454), which instead she mistakes as his name, displays the differentiation between Mama and Dee’s exposure to the world. The way in which she chose to fashion herself exudes the fact that she has no real understanding of African

culture, and she is in favor of the American simulated construction of African culture.

The quilts become a symbol of the collaboration of their family histories into tangible evidence in “Everyday Use”, when Dee returns to the house for quilts and the carved dasher, proposing to hang them up for display. This upsets the Narrator, Mama, she makes reference to Maggie being able to put them to everyday use, and she can always quilt more; while Dee adamantly protests. Mama makes a move to recover the quilts and Dee pulls them away and Mama thinks to herself “They already belonged to her” (Walker 456).

In Mama’s perspective, the point of the quilts was the tradition of quilting, not the quilts themselves. She views Dee as someone who wants to act out the movements of appreciation of their culture, instead of passing it on. In the act of retrieving the quilts from Dee’s grip, and returning them to Maggie, Mama reveals herself as an unknowing, round character that can re-act differently than what is expected of her. Mama stands up for the true traditions in the face of her daughter, although her daughter believes herself to be the all knowing one.

As well as the theme of old black world versus new, we come across the motif of names and re-naming within the short story. Just as Dee comes home dressed in African styled clothing, she re-names herself “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo” to represent her full transformation into a true African woman. Her boyfriend’s name “Hakim. a. barber” also hints to the fact that he also took up the Muslim faith in an attempt of reform. Mama makes an

effort to educate Dee on her name; how it was passed through generations and holds value in itself.

Dee dismisses this fact, and it reveals Dees ignorance of the lineage of strong women she was born from. Dee and Hakim try to hide or dissolve their actual history with the history that is more in favor with current society and hold no value in their true identities. In this instance, Dee can be portrayed as the round character, ever changing to fit her surroundings; while Mama and Maggie, the former who does not reveal their name, and the latter who has a normal name, can be portrayed as the flat characters.

However, this can be contradicted. In the beginning of the story, Mamas perception of Dee is somewhat tainted by her personal differences from Dee. The fact that Mama was not able to complete her education completely, while still providing an education for her daughter served as a wedge in between the two. Dee looked down upon mama for her lack of education, and Mama felt victimized by Dee's overwhelming need to prove her higher intellect. For example, Dee's greeting " Wa-su-zo-Tean-o! (Walker 454), a term which her mother and Maggie she knew could not understand. In result, she always assumed Dees word to be true and unworthy of contradiction. However, in the end of the story, Mama realizes that even though Dee might have a higher education and therefore exposure to the world, she still did not learn the value of the her true heritage. Something that cannot be learned through school work, and cannot be appreciated through study, was the legacy of her ancestors, something Dee adamantly dismissed as irrelevant.

Mama then becomes a round character, than can overcome the overshadow of her daughter and prove that all the education in the world cannot help keep culture alive, and only family as well as true traditions can have that effect. In irony, Dee states that it is Mama that knows nothing of their heritage, when it is in fact Dee who has lost all sense of their honest history. We can now conclude that the Narrator, “ Mama” is an unknowing character by her reactions to the antagonist “ Dee”, Mama’s actions were made based off her previous as well as current encounters with Dee.

She is in a sense a round character; that overcomes her impertinent daughter’s abhorrence of the word “ No”, and sticks to old traditions. While also, Mama is a flat character, withstanding the exposure to Dee’s education to begin and end the short story in her yard, where she finds peace and control over her environment. “ Everyday Use” did an excellent job in portraying the collision of black American freedom, and the customs of those that lived before the days of civil rights.