

Analysis of alice
walker's essay
"everyday use" in
reference to the idea
of power...



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Family is one of the most demonstrative social groups, where people related by kinship interact within complex relations of authority and power division. In well-balanced families, each member tries too use his/her authority not only for own benefit but also for the benefit of the others.

Such attitude forms the basis of responsible treatment among family members. However, in cases of disunited families, certain members employ their power for their own benefit, disregarding the needs of their relatives. An example of this can be found in Alice Walker's essay " Everyday Use", where the older sister uses her natural charisma and brightness to achieve personal success, irresponsibly neglecting her less advanced kin.

The dramatic contrast between Dee (or Wangero, as she chooses to call herself) and her mother and sister Maggie is revealed already on the level of appearance.

According to her mother's description, Dee is good-looking and stylish. She has been demanding " nice things", such as stylish matching clothes already since her teen age and has been aware of the power rendered by looks: " At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was" (Walker 451). Her limbs are perfectly shaped, which allows her mother to recognize her only catching a small glimpse of her leg stepping out of the car: "...even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee.

Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style" (Walker 451). Her mother, " a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands", and Maggie, all mutilated by " burn scars down

her arms and legs", are no-match to Dee's ostensible beauty (Walker 449-450).

Adding to the outward contrast is the discrepancy between the characters and bearings of the three women. Dee is all self-assurance; she knows her strong sides, such as general brightness and scholarship. Therefore, she is determined to achieve success; and knowing it is in her power, she would not bend down before anyone: " She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature. [...] She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts" (Walker 450).

On the contrary, her uneducated mother would never look " a strange white man in the eye"; and Maggie, though undertaking attempts at reading, " knows she is not bright", which makes her even more shy and timid (Walker 451). Maggie is opposed to Dee in her hopeless misery, " chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle", fearful and bit envious of her sister's self-confidence and ostentatious grandeur (Walker 450).

Against the background of such contraposition between success and failure, the more revealing appears the fact that Dee, in her shallow vanity, never uses her natural powers to support her family. Instead of carefully encouraging her mother's and sister's hankering after knowledge, she humiliates them by her arrogant disdain: " She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know.

Pressed us to her with the serf' oust way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand" (Walker 450).
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No wonder her motives for taking away the historical quilts — simply to hang them in her designer parlor — appear absurd to her practically-oriented mother, who has planned to give them as dowry to be practically used by her younger daughter.

At this culmination point of extreme tension between Dee's pseudo-refinement and her mother's claim to common sense, Maggie unexpectedly reveals her power of wisdom by saying that she would remember her ancestors even without any quilts (Walker 454). This statement of Maggie's inner power provokes her mother to exercise her authority and stop Dee from plundering the house which she has never respected, loved or devoted her effort to.

Any power presupposes certain degree of responsibility from its owner. In case with Dee, who has both the looks and the brains to achieve success, this power is misused. Not only does she neglect her family, but she also runs counter to her mother's will and disrespects her parent's authority.

Punishment for such outrageous behavior does not take long to come: the usually timid and miserable Maggie reveals her inner moral strength which inspires her mother to protect their right for preserving family heritage the way they considered it best.

Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." Reading Literature and Writing Argument. 3rd ed. Eds. Missy James and Alan P. Merickel. Pearson, 2007. 449-455. Print.