

Comparison of two short stories



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Comparison of Two Short Stories *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker and *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* by Ernest Hemingway are stories which pack a lot of meaning into a short space. Skilled short story writers carefully select every word and construct every sentence with the purpose of achieving a specific effect and reinforcing a particular theme. Both writers have used this skill to great effect in their stories.

In *Everyday Use*, Walker presents the reader with a study of heritage (White, 2001), and how it can be interpreted and contextualized by the value we place on objects and the uses we put them to. To a person who understands and truly lives their heritage, such as Maggie Johnson, cultural items are for every day use. For others, such as Dee Johnson, these items are related to a culture she believes she has lost, and not to the reality of her life. Dee struggles with the apparent incompatibility of her family heritage and the Black heritage that is filtered through the context of American life, while Maggie has already successfully integrated her life and her culture. This is made apparent by the way in which the two sisters view their mother's quilts - Dee wants to use them as decorative pieces, while to Maggie the quilts are things to be used for their intended purpose, and more importantly to evoke memories of the ancestors who created them.

In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, Hemingway turns the story's setting into the theme of the story itself, in contrast to Walker, who exposes her story's theme in the way her characters interact with and attach meaning to everyday objects. In Hemingway's story, the caf is a "clean and pleasant" (Hemingway) place where consolation and comfort is provided for a few hours to the people who come to it. The light of the caf is comforting and welcoming and drives out fear and dread, and for a few hours, an old man

who lives in dark and despair can feel dignity and peace. Life in the caf is contrasted with life outside it - in the caf shadows are driven out by light and exist only on the periphery, but in the world outside, the shadows are so pervasive that the old man is driven to attempt suicide. The darkness symbolizes the fear and loneliness of life (Wall, 1997, p2), and even though the light of the caf drives back the shadows, the old man still sits in shadows cast by the leaves of nearby trees - there is no light bright enough to completely and permanently eradicate neither shadows nor fear nor loneliness.

Walker develops her characters fully as the story unfolds, and we are shown their thoughts and their history, as told through accounts of several different incidents in both the past and present. Walker's technique gives her story a sense of history and culture, and the reader learns much about the lives of the characters in the story. In essence, the characters are the story. In contrast, Hemingway's story is told through description of the setting and through brief snatches of dialog rather than exploration of the inner lives of the characters. Only in one instance are we given details about a character's thoughts. Hemingway's brief descriptions of incidents and conversations give his story a sense of impermanence and distance from humanity, and we are told little about the lives and history of the story's characters.

Walker's story is warm and rich and teeming with life, while Hemingway's story feels sterile, empty and cold like glass. Walker's story is about life, and Hemingway's story is about the absence of it.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. A Clean and Pleasant Place.

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