

"everyday use" by alice walker essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the short story *Everyday Use*, Alice Walker talks about the conflict that exists between Mama and Dee. This observation is shared by many. All the literary critic and commentator will agree that there is conflict between the mother and her eldest daughter. All of them will also agree that Mama chose to stand beside Maggie and supported her while she turned her back on Dee. However, there is no universal agreement when it comes to who is right and who is wrong.

There are those who said that Mama recognized the superficiality of Dee while she favored the moral strength of Maggie. On the other side of the fence there are those who said that Dee had the correct worldview and that she was justified her attempt to transform Mama's old way of thinking. The reader must not take sides and instead find a way to reconcile the opposing worldviews of Mama and Dee.

Nancy Tuten echoes the sentiment of most readers and most commentators who said that Dee was a bad example of how a girl should behave. This is evident in the introduction to an article that she had written on this subject and she wrote " Commentaries on Alice Walker's " *Everyday Use*" typically center on Mama's awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage (Tuten, 1993, p. 125). There are many examples in Alice Walker's story that supports this view.

In the very beginning of the story one can already see the reason why Tuten disapproved of Dee's actions and supported the desire of Mama and Maggie to continue with their way of life. There was a romantic air to Mama's description of her home. She said it with affection and pride:

A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house (Walker, 1973, p. 284).

The simple life is favored over the sophisticated life of the urban dwellers. Based on the world view of Tuten someone has to preserve the best of yesteryears, when the world was all about the beauty of family and enjoying the slow-paced lifestyle. A world populated by people who are not pressured to buy the latest gadgets and be updated with the latest trend.

Tuten's commentary is a criticism to the lifestyle chosen by Dee. Tuten condemned her using a strong word and she said that is superficial. In other words she implied that Dee is all about the outward appearance and yet unable to fathom and appreciate what is deep and real.

Tuten's made some valid arguments but she must also consider the importance of progress. It is being overly romantic to keep on wishing that the old days will not pass away. Sooner or later change will overtake every country and every community. The well swept hard clay may be nice during summer but what will happen when there is heavy rain? Is it possible that Mama and Maggie will not be able to come out of the house because the place is all muddied and they can even walk to buy their food?

On the other extreme Susan Farrell disagrees with the worldview of Mama and Maggie and instead favored the forward-thinking attitude of Dee. Susan Farrell made an emphatic argument against those who try to put down Dee

and she wrote: " We must remember from the beginning that the story is told by Mama; the perceptions are filtered through her mind and her views of her two daughters are not to be accepted uncritically" (Farrell, 1998, p. 179).

This is in direct opposition to Tuten's analysis of the short story. However, Farrell went to the extreme. It is difficult to understand why she turned a blind eye to the faults of Dee.

It has to be made clear that Farrel's understanding of Alice Walker's story is an acceptable argument. One has to question who had the correct worldview. It is no loner convenient to praise Mama and Maggie's dedication to preserve traditions and to condemn Dee for her progressive thinking.

It has to be said that perhaps Dee was not materialistic but simply wanted to improve her life. She simply wanted progress over backwardness and chose improvement over stagnation. However, Farrell just like Tuten went to the extreme in their praise and condemnation of the main characters.

Both Mama and Dee needed to see the big picture. Mama cannot keep on postponing her date with the present reality. It is time for her kids to experience what it feels like to be educated. There is nothing wrong with the fact that Dee decided to go to school and desire for a better life. It is wrong for her in not encouraging Maggie to reach for the stars.

She seemed justified in her actions because of Maggie's injuries but even with a disability a child must go to school. There is no indication that Maggie is retarded and so it begs the question why she is attached to her mother like a cat's tail to a cat.

On the other hand Dee must learn to value family and traditions. She must value it the way Mama and Maggie values their family history and heritage. It seems that Dee can only manage to appreciate what they have on an intellectual level while Mama and Maggie were able to embrace what they went through and their past history from an emotional and spiritual level.

It can be argued that Alice Walker is suggesting that the qualities of Mama and Dee must be fused. This is perhaps the reason why she inserted Maggie in the story. Maggie does not hate Dee's sophistication and learning, in fact she wants to be like Dee. But at the same time Maggie is sensitive enough to honor and respect her mother and their traditions.

Maggie is the embodiment of what is possible if Mama's conservatism and Dee's progressive mindset can be combined in one person. The only thing that Maggie needed to do is to get out of her shell and not use her injuries as an excuse to grow and mature as a person.

It is not correct to take sides to choose between Mama and Dee. Both of them are correct and both of them are wrong when it comes to specific areas of their lives and their worldview. Mama cannot force her daughters to be like her - uneducated and living in a mud hut. On the other hand it is wrong for Dee to reduce everything into an intellectual treatise.

She knew the value of the quilts from a historical and analytical perspective but she is unable to show her mother and sister how much she respects the spiritual and emotional value of those quilts. Both mother and daughters must learn to live in the modern world without forgetting where they came from.

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