

An issue of culture in
everyday use



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the story *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker, we hear a story from the viewpoint of the mother which is referred to as Mama in the story who is an African American woman who received a visit from her daughter Dee. Mama along with her other daughter Maggie, who still live poor in the Deep South while Dee has moved onto a more successful life. Mama and Maggie have embraced their roots and heritage, whereas Dee on the other hand wants to get as far away from the heritage and tradition as possible.

During her return back home, Dee's attention is drawn to a quilt. It is this quilt and the title of the piece that centers on the concept of what it means to integrate one's culture into their everyday life.

To begin with a quilt is defined as a coverlet made of scraps and fragments stitched together to form a pattern (Webster). The quilt in the story was made by Grandma Dee, Big Dee, and Mama whose love and heritage was poured into this quilt, but made from scraps of dresses and shirts and part of Grandpa's Civil War uniform. The quilt is filled with memories and was hand stitched by the family which is part of the tradition of the family. Mama suggests that Dee take other ones, but Dee rejects the offer because they were stitched by machine (Walker, p. 114) and the old ones were done by hand. Mama says that she had promised them to Maggie. Dee then replies that Maggie would be backward enough to put them to everyday use (Walker, p. 114). Mama says she hopes Maggie will use them every day. This begins what it means to use and misuse heritage of a family or even a tradition.

Mama is really looking forward to Maggie using the quilt as a practical everyday item. She sees the quilts for their functional use that the quilt was made to use in everyday life. Meanwhile, Dee finds this thought to be absurd to her way of thinking. Dee thinks they are too valuable and priceless to be using as everyday necessities. Instead she believes that she should hang them. These two ideas of how to use the quilts are in complete contrast of one another and how the heritage could be used. Mama finds them practical, Dee finds them fashionable. The way in which each woman wants to use the quilt is in accordance with their characters.

Alice Walker's use of characterization plays a big part in how these two women feel about the quilt. Mama is a strong, traditional African American woman, whereas Dee finds herself aboard the Civil Rights Movement. In an article entitled *Personal Names and Heritage: Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'*, the author uses Clara and Inger Juncker comment from their book *Black Roses* in describing Dee's African American stance: Dee has joined the movement of the Cultural Nationalism, whose major spokesman was the black writer LeRoi Jones (Imamu Baraka).

Walker exemplifies this entire concept in the character of Dee. She is described as always being fashionable and when she appears at the house, she is wearing a long dress of bright colors, adorned with bracelets, and a current fad in hairstyle. Even prior to her arrival, we learned that Dee has always been different. She has never wanted to stay at home and embrace her family's hard work. Instead she was always determined to get as far away from her home roots as possible. Yet here we have Dee coming back to claim her heritage roots so she can admire them on a wall as art. Dee also

does this with the churn top and dasher. She plans on using them as centerpieces for a table. Again she is using everyday items as art.

This then challenges how one integrates culture into their life. It is obvious that Mama and Maggie use the items around their house as practical, every day, useful items. While as Dee only wants to use the same items to show off her heritage. The title of this piece suggests that one could find both the uses of art and practicality in items. Depending on how one feels about the item, it would seem it dictates its use; like Dee wants to embrace her heritage, but not her roots whereas Mama and Maggie can embrace their heritage regardless of the items. Therefore, they use them practically but appreciate where they came from.