

# Identity confusion in alice walker's "everyday use"



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Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" is a tightly woven tale that brings together many disparate elements of the story to reinforce the thesis put forward by W. E. B. DuBois that black Americans are trapped in a double consciousness between their African heritage and their American citizenship. Walker's story is about the bifurcation between a mother and a daughter, between America and Africa, and between the two cultures battling for one identity. Beyond the obvious identity confusion expressed in the character of Dee/Wangero, Walker imbues her story with symbolism that points to the general confusion of identity inherent in the African experience.

DuBois equates the experience of black America with striving to create a singular consciousness out of an identity made up of dual perspectives. DuBois writes that "One ever feels his twoness...two warring ideals in one dark body" (564). Walker's story is about this war over identity and she extends it even to the symbolism of the items that Dee wants. Dee urgently desires the butter churn and asks, "Didn't Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have?" The very fact that the churn was made from a tree, that its identity was forged into something new based upon its labor value from something that was naturally formed, is indicative of the striving for a soul about which DuBois writes. But even beyond that, there is something more to the importance of the churn. The wood that was in and of itself something important and of value was fashioned into a butter churn, an instrument that takes one thing, milk, and transforms it into something else, butter. DuBois speaks of merging without losing any essence, (565) and the butter churn is as good a symbol for that striving as any other item that might have been found in the house. For what is butter? Is it milk or is it

something entirely new? What is an African-American? Is he African or American or both? Can he be both? If butter isn't still milk, then what is it? Walker takes this symbol of merging identities that springs from a mechanism which is itself a forged tool, and refuses to overplay it. Instead, she extends the metaphor even further by having Dee decide to take the churn top and imbue with yet another identity. Dee perhaps sees making the churn top into a centerpiece as an emancipation of sorts; the churn no longer has to do work, it can become merely ornamental. The churn turns one thing into another, just as slavery turned Africans into Americans. But Walker doesn't stop there. Her use of symbolism extends to the primary object in the story.

What Dee has really come for are the quilts made by her grandmother, quilts that her mother has promised to Maggie. These quilts, though more heavily emphasized than the churn, are equally subtle symbols of striving for identity. A quilt is by its very nature something with a double consciousness. The quilt Dee wants specifically were made out of parts of old dresses that her grandmother used to wear. The quilt, like the butter churn, is a utilitarian device. However, the quilt differs from the churn in that it is made out of pre-existing utilitarian devices — the dresses — rather than something solid and independent in its identity prior to being made. Beyond that, of course, is the fact that Dee doesn't desire the quilts for their intended purpose. Once again, Dee wants to take something that has a use and turn it into an ornamental device. Dee's desire to take simple tools and transform them into something greater reflects DuBois' fight against prejudice. DuBois writes that prejudice engenders self-abasement in the black individual. (567) The

way to fight back against this self-abasement is by aspiring to culture. Dee considers herself as cultured, and beyond the abased quality of the lives lived by her mother and sister. Maggie would have the temerity to use the quilts to keep warm. Dee recognizes the true quality and value of the quilts. She will hang them on the wall. Taking something that has a use and a purpose and using it for something besides that purpose is the ultimate accomplishment in high culture. For Dee, the quilts and her ability to use them for decoration rather than for warmth represent her emancipation. That the quilts were once parts of a dress used in the first line of defense the cold-clothing-only serves to make them all the more valuable. The symbolism of warring identities is underlined throughout the story by Walker's choice of items desired by Dee.

Even more obvious than the symbolism of the items Dee wants in reference to DuBois' theory of double consciousness among black Americans is Dee herself. In many ways, Dee is less a fully realized character than she is an embodiment of the struggle for a unifying identity that DuBois so eloquently speaks about. Dee is a character at war not only with her mother and her culture, but with herself as well. This schizophrenia is addressed by DuBois, at least tangentially, when he writes about "the idea of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic." At this stage of her life Dee has still not learned to achieve this without contempt. Dee clearly shows contempt for her mother, her sister and their entire way of life. And yet she just as clearly hasn't really achieved any true emancipation; she hasn't achieved a true

consciousness of self. Dee accuses her family of not understanding their heritage. She, in fact, returns home in order to retrieve these cultural artifacts which she believes represents her heritage. But her designs and intents are anything but respectful of her heritage. In fact, she desires to put them on display in a way that is really not quite so different from the white capitalist cashing in on ethnic artworks. Dee may have changed her name to the more African-sounding Wangero Leewanikia Kemanjo, but in reality she has become even more Americanized than her family. Mother and Maggie use the objects of their heritage in obeisance to the heritage; that is, the quilts made out of old dresses were a necessity because they could not afford a new blanket or comforter. The heritage inherent in the dresses was passed onto the quilt; everything was utilitarian because it had to be. Either you made a quilt from your old dresses or you froze. That is heritage. Taking a quilt and putting it up on a wall is American waste as its most obvious. Dee may have become Wangero, but she just as well could have changed her name to JC Penney. Dee has successfully conformed to the greater ideals of the American Republic as its worse, but she has done so specifically in opposition to and contempt of her own race. Dee has not successfully found a single self-consciousness that combines her American and her African parts; she instead has merely traded her African for her American. DuBois writes of blacks living a life in which they see themselves “ through the revelation of the other world” and this is precisely what Dee does throughout the story. Dee can achieve consciousness only by comparing herself to what she was and her family still is, or against what Hakim-a-barber claims to be. The fact that she is still waging the war to combine the two into one singular sense of consciousness is made apparent by the story itself. Dee’s return to <https://assignbuster.com/identity-confusion-in-alice-walkers-everyday-use/>

retrieve the items of heritage deemed so important to her can be seen as an unconscious desire to retrieve her heritage and mend the split in her consciousness. While her initial intention may be to turn the churn top and the quilt into high cultural artifacts, she may also be attempting in a subconscious manner to come to terms the fact that she has yet to achieve the singularity of consciousness about which DuBois writes.

Walker uses both characterization and symbolism to achieve a unified vision of the battle for identity and self-consciousness faced by blacks in Americans. Slavery brought people from Africa to America and turned them into tools of capitalism and ever since the struggle has been to achieve an identity that combines their lost heritage with their new country. The problem has been compounded by the fact that so much of the heritage imposed upon them in this country has been as what they can do rather than as what they are. Walker successfully uses the symbolism of everyday items for everyday use to underscore this difficulty.