

# Short story "everyday use"

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In her short story "Everyday Use," Alice Walker takes up what is a recurrent theme in her work: the representation of the harmony as well as the conflicts and struggles within African-American culture. "Everyday Use" focuses on an encounter between members of the rural Johnson family. This encounter—which takes place when Dee (the only member of the family to receive a formal education) and her male companion return to visit Dee's mother and younger sister Maggie—is essentially an encounter between two different interpretations of, or approaches to, African-American culture.

Walker employs characterization and symbolism to highlight the difference between these interpretations and ultimately to uphold one of them, showing that culture and heritage are parts of daily life. The opening of the story is largely involved in characterizing Mrs. Johnson, Dee's mother and the story's narrator. More specifically, Mrs. Johnson's language points to a certain relationship between herself and her physical surroundings: she waits for Dee "in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy" (88).

The emphasis on the physical characteristics of the yard, the pleasure in it manifested by the word "so," points to the attachment that she and Maggie have to their home and to the everyday practice of their lives. The yard, in fact, is "not just a yard. It is like an extended living room" (71), confirming that it exists for her not only as an object of property, but also as the place of her life, as a sort of expression of herself.

Her description of herself likewise shows a familiarity and comfort with her surroundings and with herself: she is "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" (72)—in other words, she knows the reality of her body

and accepts it, even finding comfort (both physical and psychological) in the way that her “ fat keeps [her] hot in zero weather” (72). Mrs. Johnson is fundamentally at home with herself; she accepts who she is, and thus, Walker implies, where she stands in relation to her culture.

Mrs. Johnson’s daughter Maggie is described as rather unattractive and shy: the scars she bears on her body have likewise scarred her soul, and, as a result, she is retiring, even frightened. Mrs. Johnson admits, in a loving manner, that “ like good looks and money, quickness passed her by” (73). She “ stumbles” as she reads, but clearly Mrs. Johnson thinks of her as a sweet person, a daughter with whom she can sing songs at church. Most importantly, however, Maggie is, like her mother, at home in her traditions, and she honors the memory of her ancestors; for example, she is the daughter in the family who has learned how to quilt from her grandmother. Dee, however, is virtually Maggie’s opposite. She is characterized by good looks, ambition, and education (Mrs. Johnson, we are told, collects money at her church so that Dee can attend school). Dee’s education has been extremely important in forging her character, but at the same time it has split her off from her family.

Mamma says, “ She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice” (73). Dee, in other words, has moved towards other traditions that go against the traditions and heritage of her own family: she is on a quest to link herself to her African roots and has changed her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo.

In doing so, in attempting to recover her “ ancient” roots, she has at the same time denied, or at least refused to accept, her more immediate heritage, the heritage that her mother and sister share. The actions Walker’s characters take, as well as their physical attributes, are symbolic of their relation to their culture. Dee’s male companion, for example, has taken a Muslim name and now refuses to eat pork and collard greens, thus refusing to take part in the traditional African-American culture. Mrs.

Johnson, meanwhile, has “ man-working hands” and can “ kill a hog as mercilessly as a man” (72); clearly this detail is meant to indicate a rough life, with great exposure to work. Symbolic meaning can also be found in Maggie’s skin: her scars are literally the inscriptions upon her body of the ruthless journey of life. Most obviously—and most importantly—the quilts that Mrs. Johnson has promised to give Maggie when she marries are highly symbolic, representing the Johnsons’ traditions and cultural heritage.

These quilts were “ pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee “(76), both figures in family history who, unlike the present Dee, took charge in teaching their culture and heritage to their offspring. The quilts themselves are made up of fragments of history, of scraps of dresses, shirts, and uniforms, each of which represents those people who forged the family’s culture, its heritage, and its values. Most importantly, however, these fragments of the past are not simply representations in the sense of art objects; they are not removed from daily life.

What is most crucial about these quilts—and what Dee does not understand—is that they are made up of daily life, from materials that were lived in.

This, in essence, is the central point of "Everyday Use": that the cultivation and maintenance of its heritage are necessary to each social group's self-identification, but that also this process, in order to succeed, to be real, must be part of people's use every day. After all, what is culture but what is home to us, just as Mrs. Johnson's yard is home to her.