

"everyday use" by
alice walker critical
analysis research
paper



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker, which depicts the situation of a rural American south family, is one of the widely studied and regularly anthologized short stories. The story is set in a family house in a pasture and it is about an African-American mother, "Mama Johnson," and her two daughters, Maggie and Dee.

Mama, who grew up during the early twentieth century, is the main character in the story since she narrates it. She is portrayed as struggling to embrace the culture of her daughter Dee. Dee got an advanced education in Augusta Georgia before moving to work in an urban set up. Maggie, who is portrayed as the less fortunate one, stayed with her mother while Dee was going to school. The author uses her talent in writing to illustrate the difficulties encountered by African-Americans, particularly those of the females.

Currently, there are marked similarities and differences between families living now and those who lived in the past. Although there may be disparity in setting, several family issues as well as situations are similar. In addition, most families still cherish and hold certain things sacred. An example of these is culture. In this present world, most households are still interested in knowing the background they came from.

This is inclusive to both parents and their children. However, it is important to note that the significance of culture to a family is varied. A number of people take the position that their actions are dictated by their ancestral traits. For instance, a person may perceive that he or she may have inherited a character trait such as being cunning from a past relative. Even though,

some other individuals have not developed the interest of knowing their family backgrounds.

The representation of family backgrounds in "Everyday Use" is what makes this literary work unique and worthwhile. As Walker intertwines a story about the African culture and its role in one family's life, she succeeds in portraying it differently through the eyes of Mama's daughters.

Both Maggie and Dee (Wangero) have contrasting traits and both hold diverse viewpoints regarding the quilts. Mama serves the purpose of connecting her two daughters. Nevertheless, she is depicted to be closer to Maggie. This is because the two have similar behavioral traits.

Maggie and her mother hold the opinion that one's culture is based on a foundation of inherited objects as well as methods of thinking. On the other hand, Dee views culture as something that is no longer relevant in the modern society since it has been washed away by history.

The most central point is that the culture depicted in the short story is focused on learning and education. More so, the thoughts possessed by the different characters played a pivotal role in shaping the culture they depended on. Therefore, the varied viewpoints concerning African American culture result in the tension evident throughout the short story.

By the use of the technique of contrasting the characters and their opinions in the story, the author succeeds in demonstrating the significance of comprehending our present life in relation to the culture that our own people practiced in the past.

Through calculated descriptions and attitudes, the author illustrates the factors that have a say in the values of an individual's heritage and culture. Walker shows that they cannot be symbolized through the possession of objects or mere appearances. She emphasizes that the lifestyle and attitudes of an individual are the ones capable of symbolizing them.

In the short story, the author personifies the various aspects of culture and heritage. She achieves this in portraying the contrast between Dee and her mother. Mrs. Johnson and Maggie can be said to represent the relationship between generations and culture that passed between them since their actions are based on traditions and what they learnt from their past ancestors.

The author also represents Maggie as a type of culture to her mother herself, and the traditions were passed to her through teaching. As Dee's mother makes it clear to her, Maggie is conversant with her heritage, " She can always make some more; Maggie knows how to quilt" (Missy and Merickel, 454).

However, it is interesting that Dee does not take the initiative to know whether her sister is able to make quilt. Maggie demonstrates the trait of vulnerability. This makes her to be extremely uncomfortable through her inward and outward appearance. Maggie's actions demonstrate how she is self-conscious. As Mama puts it, " She will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs" (Missy and Merickel, 449). Most of the time, Maggie liked to keep to herself and follow instructions.

In the story, both Mama and Maggie are portrayed to be living in a run-down home and both of them were not educated in schools. They claim to have received teaching by means of another tradition assisted by their ancestors. The learning they received from their surroundings is out of reach of the present day society. Although Mrs. Johnson had few intentions of pursuing further education just like her daughter, Dee, she only managed to reach second grade (Missy and Merickel, 451).

Nonetheless, she seems to be contented with her own education, which she had acquired from the ancestors. Maggie just adhered to what she was told, chose to stay where she was born, and envied his sister's outward appearance. By living with her mother, she learnt the skills of life by means of the experiences of her ancestors. Her mother also taught her some traditions.

Culture through the traits of Dee is depicted in a different way from her mother and sister. Dee represents culture in the materialistic and complex context, which ought to be observed and looked upon, but not experienced. The way Dee handles herself is enough to shed more light on her perception about culture and heritage. As the story starts, the narrator takes time to tell the reader how the two sisters were different from one another.

Dee is described as "lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure" (Missy and Merickel, 450). Mama says that she is self-assured and beautiful. These attributes differentiates her from Maggie and Mrs. Johnson who were scared and rough respectively. Dee was known to portray a different

character, " She wanted nice things. At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was" (Missy and Merickel, 450-451).

She pursued further education away from her homeland. This depicts her as wanting to reach to the society in order to be famous. Mama was aware of the determination of her daughter, " She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time" (Missy and Merickel, 450-451).

During the visit, which stood for her misconception on heritage and culture, Dee endeavored to reconnect with her traditional roots (Coward, 180). The visit took place during the period of emerging black awareness and empowerment. Since it had taken years before coming home, she embraced the new lingo and style that was demonstrated by the modernized black women then.

She accompanied herself with a partner called by an Islamic name, Asalamalakim. Moreover, she now prefers to be called Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Here, the reader gets a sense of the disappointing behavior of Dede to her close relations. One anticipates that she will come back to herself before the culmination of the short story in order to realize her mistake.

To welcome her daughter home, Mama has prepared various delicacies. Among the various foods prepared, Dee's partner did not prefer to consume collards and regarded pork as not clean. However, the others consumed everything. After sometime, Dee started to trouble her mother with various questions pertaining to the household furnishings, their value, as well as

<https://assignbuster.com/everyday-use-by-alice-walker-critical-analysis-research-paper/>

their age. The household cherished pictures that were taken in front of the home.

The churn top, which was constructed by Dee's late uncle, served a historical purpose in the household. Dee considers these items as part of her culture. However, she did not think of them in that perspective while she was growing up. Her perception then was meant to illustrate how she is rooted in her culture.

It was to give an indication to her family members as well as her to her so-called friends, " I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table, and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher" (Missy and Merickel, 453). Mrs. Johnson gave permission for her daughter to take these items because she did not consider them as valuable as the quilts.

The peak of the story comes when Dee demands the quilts from her mother. She preferred the old handmaid quilts to the ones stitched by machine. Since the quilts were promised to Maggie when she will eventually marry John Thomas, her mother tried to persuade her to go for the newer ones.

After these arguments, Dee becomes angry and childish, and cries out that her sister will not be able to appreciate the old quilts. She says that Maggie would probably be " backward enough to put them to everyday use!" (Missy and Merickel, 454). For this reason, the title of the story reads " Everyday Use." By this statement, Walker presents her unique argument whether or not culture ought to be safeguarded and displayed or incorporated into everyday life. A reader can assume that the phrase " Everyday life" relates only to the argument about the quilt.

<https://assignbuster.com/everyday-use-by-alice-walker-critical-analysis-research-paper/>

However, deeper reading within the short story reveals that it concerns people's culture and heritage and how they make the decision to preserve it or not. In the story, the author developed a critique of postmodern ideals. She also illustrates the detachable nature of symbols. In proposing to hang the quilts, Wangero would be taking them away from their "everyday" use. Therefore, their embedded contextual meaning would be lost.

Mrs. Johnson stood by her decision. Thereafter, Dee and her supposed boyfriend or husband leaves the home. This illustrates another central theme in the story: standing up for the right thing no matter the consequences. This should not be just for oneself, but for others also.

This is demonstrated by the way Mama stood by her decision not to let Wangero go with the handmaid quilts. Mrs. Johnson understood how much Maggie valued the quilts. She also understood that Wangero simply wanted the family belongings so as to keep up with the new African fashion.

Moreover, Dee just wanted to be popular. That is why she even changed her name, which was not the case when she was growing up. As the two visitors leave, Dee laments that Mrs. Johnson does not understand her own heritage. Dee also proposes to her sister to strive to make something out of herself. Eventually, Mama and Maggie, relieved, gaze at the car as it leaves. They then spend time together dipping snuff and they become conscious of the fact that they are the ones enjoying their lives as well as their cherished heritage.

The misunderstanding that is evident between Dee and Maggie concerning the right ownership of the quilts and their use is essential to the theme of <https://assignbuster.com/everyday-use-by-alice-walker-critical-analysis-research-paper/>

the story. By this, the author is "arguing that the responsibility for defining African-American heritage should not be left to the Black Power movement (White, para. 16). Walker effectively argues that the Black Americans ought to take responsibility of their whole heritage, even the parts that seem to be hurting.

Mrs. Johnson symbolizes most of the African-Americans who did not know how to match their past with the civil rights movements that took place in the 1960s (Hoel, para. 2). During that time, most Blacks were not at ease with the Black Power movement solution. The technique that the author uses to challenge the African-Americans to respect their heritage is what helps to define this piece of work as a literature of importance.

"Everyday Use" is an exact symbolization of the way of life of most Black Americans in the modern society. Among them, there are those who despise their history and pay less attention to their unprivileged peers. More so, they attempt to be popular and look for wealth in the capitalist world, which entails assertiveness and opportunism.

On the other hand, the rural south is slow and they esteem the importance of the family and culture. The conservative rural folks find it difficult to embrace the extremes of urbanism. At the same time, however, those who abandoned the traditional black culture are still trying to hold on it. They achieve this by having cultural artifacts, antiques, as well as souvenirs.

Walker uniquely presents this scenario in the short story, which is about African-American identity crisis and the place of their culture and values in the modern society.

<https://assignbuster.com/everyday-use-by-alice-walker-critical-analysis-research-paper/>

Through the story, the author illustrates that it is impossible to change one's culture. This is because an individual's culture and heritage are passed on from one generation to the next. It cannot be acquired or, worse still, picked up all of a sudden. Therefore, Walker's point is clear: An individual who holds real heritage and culture is obliged to apply it each day of his or her life on earth.

Cowart, David." Heritage and Declaration in Walker's ' Everyday Use.'" Studies in Short Fiction 33 (1996): 171-84. Print.

Hoel, Helga. " Personal names and heritage: Alice Walker's " Everyday Use." Home. Online. Trondheim Cathedral School. 2009. Web.

Missy, James, and Alan, Merickel P. Reading Literature and writing argument, 3 ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 2008. Print.

White, David. "'Everyday Use': Defining African-American Heritage." Anniina's Alice Walker Page. 19 Sept. 2002. Web. <http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/davidwhite.htm>

In Everyday Use story, a mother describes her relationships with her daughter named Dee. Dee, an educated African American woman, visits her hometown located in the Deep South. The conflict between her and her sister Maggie is the central conflict of the story.

The purpose of Everyday Use is to show the challenge of the Black Power Movement, black people in general. It demonstrates their heritage, which is penetrated with the stories of pain, unjust treatment, and humiliation.

<https://assignbuster.com/everyday-use-by-alice-walker-critical-analysis-research-paper/>

The story takes place in rural Georgia in the early 1970s. During this time, the Black Power Movement emerged. Black people were trying to reconcile their ideas about being Americans and being black.

The quilt symbolizes the creativity and resourcefulness of African American women. It also symbolizes the bond between different generations of women in African American families and the community in general.