

A lesson about family: alice walker's "everyday use" essay sample

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Many sociologists define the term values as cultural types of standards by which people measure goodness and beauty. These values also serve as broad guidelines for social living and human interaction. For the most part, values are different for different cultures. However, there are many universal traits that cultures share. For example, most world cultures have some form of music. They have services for marriage and services for death. These examples mainly help to define a culture, however, the values that are placed on them tend to be fairly common. In today's world, family values are values that seem to be losing importance among people.

Unfortunately, many people today can only trace their families back two or three generations. In 1973, Alice Walker wrote a short story about a mother and her two daughters that lived in a time when family members could trace their genealogy back one hundred or two hundred years. "Everyday Use" is a story about family values and the conflict that can occur when those values are compromised. Upon reading Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use", the reader should leave with new perspectives about the importance of understanding one's heritage, about the significance of a humble beginning in life, and about the importance of being happy and content with who one is and what one has.

The importance of family heritage is something that many people have forgotten in today's world. For example, asking some people what the names are of their past relatives, is like asking them how many stars are there in

the sky. They just do not know the answer. It seems as though the people of this generation have not been taught how important it is to be proud of the traditions of their ancestors. In the story, "Everyday Use", Mama represents what her family history is all about and she is quite proud of who she is. It becomes evident to the reader, that Mama is very family oriented. She describes her two daughters, Maggie and Dee, with great detail. Although they are sisters, the daughters are very different types of people. Dee has an education and Maggie does not have one. Dee's education, as well as everything surrounding it, is what makes this story important, with regards to family heritage. To understand this, one must realize that Dee was never happy living her life with Mama in a run down, three bedroom house. At least this is what Mama thinks. In the story, Mama states that she used to think Dee hated their old house and that she hated Maggie as well.

However, Mama feels as though all of that changes when she and the church raise money to send Dee away to college. Before and even after Dee receives her education, she seems to be ashamed of Mama and Maggie and the relatives before them. It is this aspect of the story that compromises the importance of family heritage. This is apparent when Dee reintroduces herself as Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. "I could not bear it any longer being named after the people who oppressed me" (Walker 491). Dee's feeling of oppression suggests to the reader that she resents the family that raised her. At this point, she has become extremely ethnocentric, in that she is passing judgment on her family's culture by comparing it with the standards of her "new" culture.

Dee's gift of education causes an epiphany for her. However, she does not forget the importance of family heritage. Rather, her formal education causes her to view heritage in a very materialistic fashion because she now looks at the objects of her family's past as symbolic trophies. Dee does not want these objects for their everyday use and practicality. On the other hand, Mama and Maggie value these items for those reasons and therein lies another conflict in the story. In essence, Mama, Dee, and Maggie all recognize the importance of family heritage. However, each view the concept differently and this is why they have problems with each other.

In addition to valuing one's heritage, it is also important to be thankful or humble with regards to the circumstances in which one's life begins. In other words, a person should not take good fortune for granted, because everyone in the world starts life with nothing. This is certainly how things were for Maggie and Dee. However, their attitudes about life and their history are completely different. Maggie seems to be indifferent about her surroundings. Her attitude towards everything is very humble. This is perhaps due to the fact that she was burned very badly as a young child, in a house fire that destroyed the family's previous home. Her childhood innocence is taken from her because she faces death at such an early age. In fact, the experience physically weakens Maggie as a person and the reader becomes more and more aware of this each time Mama makes reference to her. "Have you ever seen a lame animal sidle up to someone?"

This is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to

the ground" (Walker 489). Maggie demands nothing from anyone because she feels lucky to be alive. Dee, on the other hand, "has always held life in the palm of one hand and thinks that no is a word the world never learned to say to her" (Walker 488). Again, Dee is so different from her mother and sister. In the story, when Mama describes the daughters' reaction to the fire, she states that Dee had a look of concentration on her face. To the reader, this suggests that Dee was happy to see the crummy, old house disappear.

Many people, in the face of such disaster, would tend to be a little more humble than Dee appears to be. In general, Dee seems to show malice and resentment towards the fact that she had to start her life in such poor and unforgiving conditions. This attitude is a big part of Dee's fall in this story. Maggie and Dee exit from innocence early in their lives and it changes both of them in uniquely negative ways. Maggie takes no aspect of her beginning for granted, where as Dee holds everything about her beginning in contempt.

Finally, nothing is more important in life than being happy with oneself. This means respecting one's roots and being appreciative of the people and the things one has in his or her life. In "Everyday Use", Mama represents these qualities the most. She makes no quarrels about the fact she has to work for her and Maggie's survival. She would have life in no other way and she is proud of this. The reader understands this fact more each time Mama describes something. For example, although clay and sand make up Mama's yard, to her it is the most pleasant clay and sand yard in the world, when it is clean. Mama speaks proudly about the fact that she has to do men's jobs.

According to her, these are what she was meant to do. At one point, Mama even states how she used to love milking the cows because they were soothing animals. She does not care what people think about her, and because of this, she epitomizes what it means to be content with who one is. Some critics might argue that Mama is a close minded person who is not open to change.

The author seems to suggest that Mama is just comfortable with her life and sees no need to change. Once again, Dee represents the change in the family. Before going off to school, Dee is very unhappy with having nothing of material worth. Mama says early on that Dee wanted only nice things. This is not necessarily a bad thing, though. Dee wanting nice things only gives her the desire to go and get her education, so she can make something of herself. However, as stated before, this outlook gives Dee no reason to hate her humble beginning. In addition, upon completion of her education, Dee is still unhappy with some things about her life. These things are her mother and her sister and the conditions in which they live. Mama states, " she wrote me once that no matter where we choose to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends" (Walker 490).

This statement exemplify Dee's shame of her family. Even though Dee has accomplished a great task with her education, she still feels as if something is missing in her life. When she visits Mama and Maggie, she begins to snap polaroid pictures of Mama and of the house, but she does not say why. Dee also wants to take certain items from the house so she can use them for decorations. The pictures alone suggest that she wants to take proof of her "

hard" life back with her. Perhaps the sympathy she hopes to gain will give her satisfaction and fulfillment. Regardless of the reason, Dee's unnecessary need for these things leads to the final conflict between herself and Mama, as well as her abrupt exit from the story. For Dee, the importance of being happy with oneself is not forgotten. It is ill-conceived.

In conclusion, the importance of things such as heritage, humbleness, and happiness must not be forgotten. Alice Walker reminds readers of this in her story, "Everyday Use". Walker gives readers insight into what things are like when family members lose sight of their values. Mama, Maggie, and Dee each have their own opinions about life and the way life should be lived. This example is a good indication of what happens when people mix life experience with formal education. The conclusion is chaos most of the time. In this story, chaos comes with Mama's struggle to understand Dee's desire for her new identity.

It concludes when Mama comes to a certain realization. "When I looked at Maggie like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I am in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout" (Walker 494). For Mama and her daughters, the result of this epiphany causes an end to their chaos and a return to order. Dee exits at this point and leads readers to believe that she just gives up on her family. After all, in her mind, she is the better person because she has the education. As for Mama and Maggie, they just sit in the "yard" and dip snuff until it is time for bed, happy with themselves and still proud of the family and the history they represent.