

# [Analysis of character in "everyday use” and the heiress](https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-character-in-everyday-use-and-the-heiress/)

In Alice Walker’s famous short story “ Everyday Use,” Dee is perceived as an unsympathetic character. It is difficult for the reader to feel compassion for Dee since she possesses repelling characteristics; she is as authoritative, manipulative, and self-absorbed. Although “ Everyday Use” provides brief glimpses into the past, it is nearly impossible for the reader to have a full understanding of the truth in Dee’s upbringing prior to the story. Ruth and Augustus Goetz’s play The Heiress presents the journey of Catherine, a character who, in the final scene, shares similar characteristics with Dee; however, the audience witnesses Catherine’s troublesome upbringing and the traumatic events that unfold before the final scene. In The Heiress, the audience sees a change in Catherine, giving reason as to why she grew into a cold-hearted character. “ Everyday Use” is equivalent to the last scene of The Heiress, with the significant difference that the reader does not have the opportunity to experience Dee’s journey. This comparison raises a question: Would the reader be more sympathetic towards Dee if the reader truly knew her past?

It is evident that Dee is the antagonist of Walker’s “ Everyday Use.” Although the term “ antagonist” doesn’t necessarily describe the villain of a story, Dee is clearly a villain. In the opening paragraph, the character and narrator, Mama, is frightened of her daughter Dee, as she and her youngest daughter, Maggie, wait upon Dee’s arrival. According to Susan Ferrell in her article “ Fight Vs. Flight: A Re-Evaluation Of Dee In Alice Walker’s ‘ Everyday Use,’” “ Dee inspires in Mama a type of awe and fear more suitable to the advent of a goddess than the love one might expect a mother to feel for a returning daughter” (Ferrell). After arriving home from college, Dee dresses in attire that is strictly her own style–completely different from the clothes of her sister and mother. Dee says that orchids from home are “ tacky flowers,” and Mama simply imagines a moment when Dee would pin an orchid on her shirt (Walker 78). Since moving out of the house, Dee has even changed her name to Wangero, saying “’I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me’” (Walker 81). And during her visit home Dee has brought with her a boyfriend who says that farming and raising cattle aren’t “ his style” (Walker 82).

While Dee has changed her appearance and lifestyle to escape her heritage, she also practices manipulative and authoritative tactics to get what she wants. “ She would always look anyone in the eyes. Hesitation was no part in her nature,” Mama would say, and Maggie believes that Dee “ has held life always in the palm of one hand, that ‘ no’ is a word the world never learned to say to her” (Walker 78). With an overdramatic level of appreciation for home, Dee tries to manipulate her mother into giving her a family heirloom to take back with her to the city. She arrives with a Polaroid camera and “ never takes a shot without making sure the house is included” (Walker 81). As she sits at the dinner table she exclaims how wonderful the food is and how she never knew how “ lovely” the benches were and that she could “ feel the rump prints” in them. All of this before saying, “’I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have’” (Walker 82).

In Catherine’s final scene of The Heiress, she shares similar characteristics with Dee. Morris has arrived at Catherine’s home–to the inherited house of her deceased father. Catherine practices great manipulation by agreeing to pursue marriage once again with Morris, and, after his attempt to embrace her, she says, “ Not now, Morris, later. If we start to kiss we shall never make it to the parsonage” (Goetz 87-88). While Morris gathers a few belongings from his house before the elopement, Catherine practices an authority similar to Dee’s by closing the drapes on all the windows and ordering her maid to bolt the front door. As she ascends the stairs, Morris bangs on the door, calling for Catherine, but she doesn’t look back.

Based on the final scene of The Heiress alone, it would be difficult for the audience to sympathize with Catherine. Instead, the audience cheers for Catherine because the audience has experienced her journey. At the beginning of Act II, Catherine agrees to marry Morris, the first man to court Catherine, a woman who is not described as being beautiful. On the night of their elopement, Catherine eagerly awaits Morris in the downstairs of her father’s house with her bags packed; however, Morris never returns to the house to get her, and she never sees him again until the final scene two years later. Catherine’s view of love was previously distorted by her relationship with her father. Catherine’s mother died in giving birth to her. Her father continuously talked about how Catherine’s mother had so much “ grace” and “ gaiety” and how she was “ a pleasure to look at and be with.” Instead of loving Catherine as his daughter, her father says, “ I have concentrated my whole life on seeing her approach the perfection of her mother” (Goetz 19). After experiencing this journey of heartbreak with Catherine, the audience can readily see the reasons for her malicious actions in the final scene.

With the consideration of context clues, it is possible to draw reasonable conclusions from Dee’s unwritten past that would provide more sympathy for her character. It is important to remember that “ Everyday Use” is told through the eyes of Mama: “ the perceptions are filtered through her mind and her views of her two daughters are not to be accepted uncritically” (Farrell). The way that Mama describes Dee may not be entirely true, since the narrator is also a biased character in the story: “ Mama’s expectations of Dee tell us more about Mama herself than they do about Dee” (Farrell). It is clear that Dee had always been different than her family. She was intelligent, outgoing, and “ at sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was” (Walker 79). It’s reasonable to imagine that Dee felt suffocated by her family and that she was punished for being different. In a family with such strong roots, Dee was probably never encouraged to dream big or to pursue anything outside of her small town. These are plausible reasons that would cause Dee inhabit the villainous characteristics the reader sees in “ Everyday Use.”

At the end of the short story, Dee tells her little sister, “’You ought to try to make something of yourself too, Maggie. It’s a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you’d never know it’” (Walker 84). What if the story could have been told in Dee’s perspective over the course of several years, with “ Everyday Use” as the final scene? Would the reader think of her differently? While the reader may fail to sympathize with the Dee presented in the short story, the reader may be able to sympathize with her past.

## Works Cited

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