

Everyday use by alice walker essay sample



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Repetition leads to habit. Collective habit in a community though becomes tradition and eventually heritage. Alice Walker in “ Everyday Use” uses quilts as a representation of two different approaches of preserving African American heritage in the ever evolving modern world. Dee is the woman who “ made it” (Walker 103), who becomes suddenly passionate about protecting her roots. As the older daughter in the Johnson family, she is lucky enough to be sent to college and after many years, she decides to visit her rural home, a place she thinks she has outgrown.

The new Dee adopts a newly-found Africanism and even changes her name to a more superficially impressive “ Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo”. The reader soon discovers her selfish reasons for her visit. She wants proof of her humble beginnings; she wants to show the world how far she’s come. When Dee takes Polaroids of her mom and sister, she always “[makes] sure the house is included” (105). She is like a tourist, taking pictures she can later brag about.

More importantly, she returns because she wants the old quilts her grandma, who ironically shares the same name as her, made. The older daughter sees the quilts as a link between her and the larger African American past. She correctly considers them as a part of a fleeting inheritance but she fails to realize her own alienation from the rich tradition. In her attempt to make a statement, she has ironically adopted the white man’s approach at preserving heritage, which involves hanging the quilts rather than using them (108).

Dee's attempts are perceived as phony. She accuses her family of not appreciating their heritage, when she herself tries so hard to sever ties with the truth. Maggie, the younger sister, approaches her heritage in a more subtle and maybe even ignorant way. She might lack Dee's education and worldliness, but in contrast she knows everything there is to know about quilting, family history, and life in the country. Maggie's apathy to the revolutionary times is not completely due to ignorance. It's her own choice to "good-heartedly" (104) stay with her mom.

She and the mom don't understand Dee's definition of heritage because they live their definition everyday. Why would anyone use the churn top as a centerpiece when one can make butter with it? Even more specifically, why hang the quilts when one can use them when the days and nights get cold? The quilts represent Maggie's deep understanding of her past, her true past: not a made up, elegant and more complex African one, but a real past, one with tradition that can be traced back "beyond the Civil War" (106).

Her heritage is alive and put to everyday use unlike her sister's whose is just something pretty to admire when desired. The quilts are efficient to Maggie and her mom and carry a real purpose, not just a decorative one. Just like one can "feel the rump prints" (107) in the benches and see the "[shameful] burn scars" (102) in the little sister's arms, one can sense the value of the quilts by the way Maggie reacts to the thought of giving them to her undeserving sister.

The effects of heritage are not only present in the material possessions but in Maggie herself. Maggie and Dee are both aware that in the white man's

world, their customs and traditions are the minority. They recognize the need to preserve them, but use completely different methods to do so. The true inheritor of this heritage is revealed when the mom gives the quilts to Maggie. Dee supports a long lost African legacy, while Maggie supports the true African American tradition. The quilts, just like a habit, were meant to be used everyday.