

everyday use alice walker

Everyday use Alice Walker explores the complex themes of heritage, identity, and the differing interpretations of culture through the lens of two sisters in rural Georgia. Alice Walker's poignant novella, "Everyday Use," delves into the concept of heritage and how it is perceived and valued differently by individuals, particularly within the context of African American history and tradition. This article will dissect the narrative, characters, and the enduring significance of Alice Walker's short story, offering a comprehensive analysis of its literary merit and its impact on discussions surrounding cultural preservation. We will examine Dee's (Wangero's) evolving identity, Maggie's quiet strength, and Mama's role as the matriarchal interpreter of their shared past.

- Introduction to "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker
- The Core Conflict: Heritage as Performance vs. Lived Experience
- Character Analysis in "Everyday Use"
 - Mama: The Grounded Narrator
 - Dee (Wangero): The Assimilated Intellectual
 - Maggie: The Inheritor of Tradition
- Symbolism in "Everyday Use"
 - The Quilts: Tangible Heirlooms
 - The Butter Churn and Dasher: Everyday Objects, Deep Meaning
 - The Names: Identity and Ancestry
- Themes Explored in "Everyday Use"
 - The Nature of Heritage
 - The Importance of Ancestry
 - Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation
 - The Power of Education
 - Family Relationships

- Alice Walker's Literary Style and Impact
- The Enduring Relevance of "Everyday Use"

Unpacking "Everyday Use": Alice Walker's Masterful Exploration of Heritage

Alice Walker's iconic short story, "Everyday Use," is a cornerstone of American literature, offering a profound and nuanced examination of heritage, identity, and the very definition of what it means to be connected to one's past. Set in the post-Civil Rights era South, the narrative centers on a family grappling with different understandings of their African American legacy. The story unfolds through the perspective of Mama, a pragmatic and resilient woman who lives a simple life with her physically and emotionally scarred daughter, Maggie. Their lives are disrupted by the arrival of Mama's elder daughter, Dee, who has returned from college with a new name, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, and a drastically altered perspective on her heritage. The story vividly contrasts Wangero's academic and performative approach to her ancestry with Mama and Maggie's more deeply rooted, lived experience of tradition. Alice Walker masterfully uses this domestic setting to explore broader societal questions about cultural authenticity and the ownership of history.

At its heart, "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is a powerful commentary on how individuals internalize and express their cultural inheritance. The story challenges readers to consider whether heritage is something to be displayed and admired from a distance, or something to be lived, used, and integrated into the fabric of daily life. Walker's prose is rich with sensory detail, allowing readers to viscerally experience the poverty and the enduring strength of Mama and Maggie's lives, making the contrast with Wangero's educated detachment even more striking. The narrative's exploration of the Black experience in America provides a critical lens through which to understand the complex relationship between past and present, and the ongoing struggle for self-definition.

The Core Conflict: Heritage as Performance vs. Lived Experience in "Everyday Use"

The central tension in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is the stark dichotomy between two fundamentally different approaches to heritage: one that is lived and embodied, and another that is academic and performative. Wangero, formerly Dee, returns from college with a newfound, and to Mama and Maggie, somewhat artificial, appreciation for her African roots. She has adopted an African name and is eager to collect and display artifacts from her family's past, seeing them as exotic relics to be preserved and admired. This perspective is epitomized by her desire to take the handmade quilts, which Mama had intended for Maggie to use on her eventual marriage bed.

Wangero views the quilts as precious historical artifacts, worthy of being hung on a wall as art. She dismisses Maggie's claim, stating that Maggie would "probably be lucky if she ever gets them," implying that Maggie wouldn't appreciate their significance. This highlights Wangero's detachment

from the practical, everyday use of these items. For Mama and Maggie, the quilts represent warmth, love, and continuity; they are tangible links to the women who made them and the generations who will use them. They are meant to be a source of comfort and a part of the ongoing cycle of life, not static museum pieces.

This fundamental difference in perspective creates the story's emotional and thematic core. Walker suggests that true heritage is not merely about acknowledging or displaying ancestry, but about living it, about carrying its lessons and traditions forward in a meaningful, functional way. Wangero's approach, while perhaps well-intentioned, is seen by Mama as superficial and a form of cultural appropriation, even from within her own family. She is trying to claim a heritage she feels has been imposed upon her, rather than one she has truly internalized and lived. Alice Walker's masterful portrayal of this conflict invites readers to question what constitutes genuine cultural connection and how history should be honored.

Character Analysis in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker meticulously crafts her characters in "Everyday Use" to embody the story's central themes. Each character serves as a distinct representation of different facets of cultural identity and familial relationships. Their interactions and motivations reveal the complexities of navigating one's past in the present day.

Mama: The Grounded Narrator

Mama is the story's narrator and the emotional anchor of the family. She is a strong, pragmatic woman who has worked hard her entire life, enduring the hardships of poverty and raising her daughters. She is deeply connected to her family history, not through academic study, but through lived experience and the practical application of traditions. Mama possesses a quiet wisdom and a deep understanding of what truly matters. Her initial hesitation and eventual decision to give the quilts to Maggie reflect her evolving understanding of heritage and her innate sense of justice. She recognizes that Wangero's desire for the quilts is for show, while Maggie's desire is rooted in love and continuity. Alice Walker portrays Mama as a woman whose strength comes from her unwavering connection to her roots and her ability to discern superficiality from substance.

Dee (Wangero): The Assimilated Intellectual

Dee, who renames herself Wangero, represents a generation that, after experiencing greater educational opportunities, seeks to reclaim and redefine their African heritage. However, her approach is marked by an intellectualism that, in Mama's eyes, borders on the performative and the superficial. She arrives in a stylish dress, with a male companion, and a seemingly detached air, eager to claim cultural artifacts as her own. Her desire to take the quilts, the butter churn, and the dasher is not for their practical use but for their aesthetic and symbolic value, to be displayed as art. Wangero's embrace of her African identity, while on the surface a positive reclamation, is presented by Alice Walker as a somewhat superficial adoption, disconnected from the lived realities of her

family's past. She criticizes her mother and sister for not understanding their heritage, ironically failing to recognize the authentic connection they possess.

Maggie: The Inheritor of Tradition

Maggie is the younger daughter, physically and emotionally scarred from a childhood house fire that also took her father and several siblings. She is shy, withdrawn, and often overlooked. However, beneath her quiet exterior lies a deep appreciation for her family's history and traditions. She is the one who has learned the ways of her ancestors, from the artistry of quilting to the uses of everyday objects. Maggie's connection to the quilts is deeply personal; she remembers her grandmother, Doolie, teaching her to quilt and has even learned to quilt herself. When Mama gives her the quilts, it is a recognition of Maggie's genuine, lived connection to their heritage. Alice Walker uses Maggie to embody the idea that heritage is not something to be collected, but something to be embodied and passed on through intimate, familial transmission. Her quiet strength and resilience make her the true inheritor of their legacy.

Symbolism in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker

Alice Walker masterfully employs a rich tapestry of symbols in "Everyday Use" to convey the story's multifaceted themes. These objects are not mere props but are imbued with deep historical, cultural, and emotional significance, serving as powerful representations of the characters' differing relationships with their heritage.

The Quilts: Tangible Heirlooms

The quilts are arguably the most potent symbols in "Everyday Use." They are tangible manifestations of generations of women's labor, skill, and love. Made from scraps of old clothing, these quilts are not just functional items for warmth; they are repositories of family history, each patch representing a person, an event, or a memory. Wagero sees them as valuable art objects to be displayed, reflecting her desire to own and exhibit her heritage. Maggie, on the other hand, understands their true value lies in their use and the continuity they represent. Mama's ultimate decision to give the quilts to Maggie signifies her recognition that heritage is meant to be lived and used, passed down through hands that understand their creation and purpose, not merely admired from afar. Alice Walker uses the quilts to highlight the tension between preserving the past as static history versus allowing it to live and evolve.

The Butter Churn and Dasher: Everyday Objects, Deep Meaning

The butter churn and dasher, along with other handmade items like the opium lamp, also carry significant symbolic weight. These are objects of daily life, essential tools that were crafted by hand

and passed down through the family. Wangero's desire to take these items, like the quilts, for decorative purposes underscores her superficial engagement with her heritage. She wants the aesthetic without the lived experience or the understanding of their practical utility. For Mama and Maggie, these objects are reminders of hard work, resourcefulness, and the ingenuity of their ancestors. They are symbols of a legacy built on survival and practical skill, the very essence of what it means to carry on tradition in a tangible, meaningful way. Alice Walker uses these humble objects to expose the shallowness of Wangero's cultural claims.

The Names: Identity and Ancestry

The changing of names is another powerful symbol within "Everyday Use." Dee's decision to adopt the African name Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo is a deliberate act to shed her perceived oppressive American identity and embrace a more authentic African heritage. However, Mama points out that "Dee" was the name given to her by her family, a connection to her African American lineage, and that her new name is a reminder of the slave owner, Frederick Douglass, whose name she bears. This irony highlights the complexity of identity and the difficulty of severing oneself from one's immediate history to embrace a more distant one. Alice Walker uses this element to explore the idea that reclaiming heritage can be a complex process, and that sometimes, in seeking a lost past, one can inadvertently dismiss the immediate, lived history that shapes them.

Themes Explored in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a richly layered narrative that delves into several profound themes, resonating with readers through its poignant exploration of universal human experiences within a specific cultural context. The story serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of heritage, identity, and the enduring power of family.

The Nature of Heritage

Perhaps the most prominent theme in "Everyday Use" is the multifaceted nature of heritage. Alice Walker presents two contrasting views: heritage as a static, aesthetic object to be admired and collected (Wangero), and heritage as a living, dynamic force to be lived and embodied (Mama and Maggie). The story questions whether heritage is something that can be adopted or if it must be earned through lived experience and personal connection. Walker suggests that true heritage is woven into the fabric of everyday life, passed down through shared memories, practical skills, and familial love, rather than through superficial displays or academic pronouncements. This theme challenges readers to consider how they personally engage with and define their own heritage.

The Importance of Ancestry

The story underscores the profound importance of connecting with one's ancestry. Wangero's attempt to reclaim her African roots, though flawed in its execution, highlights a desire for a deeper

connection to a history that was systematically suppressed. Mama and Maggie, in their own way, maintain this connection through their daily lives and their understanding of family traditions. The quilts, for instance, are not just blankets but are imbued with the spirits and memories of the women who made them. Alice Walker emphasizes that understanding and honoring one's ancestors provides a sense of identity, belonging, and continuity, even amidst hardship and oppression. The narrative suggests that a disconnect from ancestry can lead to a superficial understanding of self.

Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation

Alice Walker subtly explores the delicate line between cultural appropriation and genuine appreciation. Wangero's fascination with African artifacts and her adoption of an African name can be seen as an attempt to reclaim and appreciate her heritage. However, her desire to take the handmade quilts and display them as art, while dismissing Maggie's intent to use them, leans towards appropriation. She is taking elements of her culture without fully understanding or respecting their lived context. Mama's protectiveness of the quilts for Maggie, who will use them in her life, represents a more authentic form of appreciation – one that honors the object's purpose and the hands that made it. The story prompts reflection on how one engages with cultural traditions, especially those of marginalized communities.

The Power of Education

Education plays a significant role in the divergent paths of the sisters. Dee's education has exposed her to new ideas and a broader perspective, leading her to re-examine her identity and heritage. However, the story implies that education alone does not guarantee a deeper understanding or a more authentic connection to one's roots. While Dee has gained academic knowledge, she seems to have lost touch with the essence of her family's lived experience. Alice Walker doesn't devalue education, but she posits that it must be balanced with lived experience and a genuine emotional connection to one's past to be truly meaningful. The story suggests that education can open doors but should not close them to the values and traditions learned at home.

Family Relationships

The complex dynamics of family relationships are central to "Everyday Use." The bond between Mama and Maggie is characterized by a quiet understanding and mutual support, born from shared hardship. The relationship between Mama and Dee is more strained, marked by a generational and ideological divide. Mama loves both her daughters but struggles to reconcile Dee's adopted persona with the daughter she raised. The story highlights how family ties can be tested by differing values and perspectives, but also how they can be a source of enduring strength and connection. Alice Walker's portrayal of these relationships is nuanced, showing both the love and the conflict that can exist within a family unit.

Alice Walker's Literary Style and Impact

Alice Walker's distinctive literary style in "Everyday Use" is characterized by its lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and its profound emotional resonance. She masterfully employs a Southern dialect and colloquialisms, which lend authenticity and depth to the narrative and characters. Walker has a remarkable ability to imbue everyday objects and experiences with profound meaning, transforming the mundane into the significant. Her narrative voice, through Mama, is direct, introspective, and deeply observant, allowing readers to intimately connect with the character's thoughts and feelings. This straightforward yet poetic approach makes the story accessible while also offering layers of symbolic interpretation.

The impact of "Everyday Use" on American literature and cultural discourse is undeniable. It has become a staple in academic curricula, sparking critical discussions about African American identity, cultural preservation, and the legacy of slavery. Walker's story challenges conventional notions of what constitutes valuable heritage and offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant cultural perspectives. It provides a nuanced portrayal of the Black family experience, celebrating resilience and the enduring strength of tradition. The story's enduring popularity and continued relevance speak to its timeless exploration of universal themes and its profound contribution to understanding the complexities of cultural inheritance and personal identity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the significance of 'everyday use' by Alice Walker in contemporary literature?

'Everyday Use' remains significant for its exploration of African American identity, heritage, and the complexities of familial relationships. Its themes of cultural appropriation versus authentic connection continue to resonate, sparking discussions about how history and tradition are valued and passed down.

How does Alice Walker portray the differences between Dee and Maggie in 'everyday use'?

Walker sharply contrasts Dee and Maggie through their attitudes towards their heritage. Dee, renamed 'Wangero,' seeks to display and commodify their family heirlooms as art, disconnected from their lived experience. Maggie, in contrast, embodies a more practical and lived connection to their past, representing the oral traditions and everyday use of these items.

What is the central conflict in Alice Walker's 'everyday use'?

The central conflict revolves around the differing interpretations of heritage and its preservation. It's a clash between Dee's desire to aestheticize and distance herself from her past by owning and displaying heirlooms, and Mama and Maggie's belief that true heritage lies in living traditions and the practical, continued use of those objects.

What do the quilts represent in Alice Walker's 'everyday use'?

The quilts are powerful symbols of family history, memory, and the tangible connection to past generations. For Dee, they are art objects to be admired from afar. For Mama and Maggie, they are functional pieces imbued with the stories of their ancestors, meant to be used and passed down through use.

How does 'everyday use' reflect the Black Arts Movement?

The story can be seen as a commentary on the Black Arts Movement's emphasis on Black aesthetics and cultural pride. While appreciating the movement's goals, Walker subtly questions a superficial or performative approach to heritage, highlighting the importance of genuine connection and lived experience over mere display.

What is Alice Walker's message about embracing one's roots in 'everyday use'?

Walker's message suggests that embracing one's roots is not about adopting exoticized or commodified versions of heritage. Instead, it's about understanding, valuing, and continuing the traditions that connect you to your ancestors and community, often through everyday actions and lived experiences.

How does the character of Mama evolve in 'everyday use'?

Mama experiences a significant internal shift. Initially deferential to Dee, she ultimately asserts her own understanding of heritage and makes a decisive choice to protect Maggie's connection to their past, recognizing the deeper value in lived tradition over superficial display.

Why is the story titled 'everyday use'?

The title is central to the story's theme. It emphasizes that true heritage and the meaning of family heirlooms lie not in their preservation as static artifacts, but in their continued use and integration into the daily lives of future generations, a practical and lived connection.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the everyday use of Alice Walker's themes, each starting with *and* followed by a brief description:

1. *Inheriting the Everyday Rituals*

This collection explores how the practices and traditions passed down through generations, particularly within Black communities, shape daily life. It delves into the significance of inherited objects and routines as markers of identity and resilience. The essays examine how these everyday acts connect individuals to their past and inform their present.

2. *The Color Purple in Daily Life*

This book examines the enduring impact of Walker's most famous novel on contemporary discussions of everyday life. It analyzes how the themes of abuse, healing, sisterhood, and self-discovery continue

to resonate and influence personal choices and societal perceptions. The text explores how readers find empowerment and understanding in the characters' struggles and triumphs.

3. *Everyday Justice, Everyday Grace*

This work investigates the ways in which individuals navigate and enact justice and grace in their daily interactions. It draws parallels to Walker's exploration of overcoming adversity and finding humanity in challenging circumstances. The book highlights the small, often overlooked acts of kindness and moral courage that sustain communities.

4. *Conversations with Everyday Ancestors*

This book imagines dialogues with the past, focusing on how ancestral wisdom informs and guides contemporary, everyday decisions. It explores the spiritual and emotional connections people maintain with those who came before them. The narratives illustrate how heritage is kept alive through daily practices and personal reflection.

5. *The Meridian of Our Homes*

This title refers to the internal compass and sense of place that guides individuals through their daily existence. It draws inspiration from Walker's focus on finding strength and grounding within oneself and one's immediate surroundings. The book explores the creation of sanctuary and meaning in everyday domestic spaces.

6. *Everyday Resistance, Everyday Hope*

This compilation focuses on the quiet acts of defiance and the persistent optimism that characterize daily life for many. It reflects Walker's commitment to illustrating the strength found in enduring hardship and maintaining a belief in a better future. The stories showcase how small acts of courage can lead to significant personal and collective transformation.

7. *The Blessing of Everyday Work*

This book celebrates the dignity and inherent value found in the labor that sustains our lives. It aligns with Walker's appreciation for the labor of women and marginalized communities. The text examines how work, whether paid or unpaid, contributes to identity and community building in tangible, everyday ways.

8. *Our Own Everyday Spirituality*

This exploration delves into the personal and often unconventional ways individuals connect with the sacred in their daily routines. It echoes Walker's own fluid and inclusive understanding of spirituality, often found in nature and human relationships. The book highlights the profound and intimate moments that nourish the soul.

9. *The Garden of Everyday Wisdom*

This title suggests the cultivation of practical knowledge and insights through everyday experiences. It relates to Walker's deep connection with the natural world and her belief in learning from observation and direct engagement. The essays offer reflections on how simple, daily processes can yield profound understanding and growth.

Everyday Use Alice Walker

Related Articles

- [example of sociology essay](#)
- [essentials of statistics for the behavioral sciences](#)
- [famous irish women in history](#)

[Back to Home](#)