

everyday use by alice walker analysis

Everyday Use by Alice Walker analysis delves into the complexities of heritage, identity, and family relationships within the African American experience. Alice Walker's masterful short story, "Everyday Use," published in 1973, offers a profound examination of how individuals connect with their past and how this connection shapes their present and future. This analysis will explore the story's rich thematic tapestry, focusing on the contrasting perspectives of Mama, Dee (later Wangero), and Maggie, and how their differing views on heritage manifest in their understanding and use of family heirlooms. We will investigate the symbolism embedded within the quilts and other objects, the character development of each woman, and the underlying social and cultural commentary Walker provides. Understanding this narrative allows for a deeper appreciation of the multifaceted nature of cultural identity and the enduring significance of familial bonds.

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Understanding Alice Walker's "Everyday Use": A Deep Dive

Alice Walker's iconic short story, "Everyday Use," is a cornerstone of African American literature, offering a poignant and insightful exploration of heritage, identity, and the often-conflicting ways individuals connect with their ancestral past. Through the distinct voices and perspectives of its central characters – Mama, her educated older daughter Dee (who renames herself Wangero), and her shy younger daughter Maggie – Walker crafts a narrative that resonates with themes of cultural reclamation, the definition of family legacy, and the very essence of what it means to live with and honor one's history. The story highlights a fundamental divergence in how heritage is perceived: as a living, breathing element to be actively engaged with in daily life, or as an artifact to be admired and preserved from a distance. This intricate interplay between characters and their beliefs makes "Everyday Use" a rich subject for analysis.

Character Analysis: Mama, Dee, and Maggie's Distinct Perspectives

"Everyday Use" is fundamentally a character-driven narrative, with Alice Walker meticulously crafting three women who embody different facets of the African American experience and their relationship to heritage. The contrasting personalities and philosophies of Mama, Dee (Wangero), and Maggie serve as the engine driving the story's central conflicts and thematic explorations. Their interactions and differing interpretations of their shared history provide a nuanced view of cultural identity.

Mama: The Grounded Narrator and Keeper of Tradition

Mama, the narrator of "Everyday Use," represents the resilient and practical spirit of her people. Having lived through hardship, she is deeply connected to the land and the tangible realities of her family's history. Her understanding of heritage is rooted in utility and lived experience; she sees history not as something to be displayed, but as something to be actively carried forward and utilized in everyday life. Her strength lies in her unpretentious wisdom and her deep, unspoken love for her daughters. She is the anchor, the one who remembers the stories and the people behind the objects.

Dee (Wangero): The Reclaimed Identity and Aesthetic Appreciation

Dee's transformation into Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo marks a significant shift in her perception of her identity and heritage. Inspired by the Black Power movement and a newfound interest in her African roots, Dee embraces a more performative and aesthetic approach to her ancestry. She views family heirlooms, particularly the quilts, as artifacts to be preserved and displayed, rather than used. Her rejection of her given name signifies a desire to distance herself from what she perceives as a subjugated past, while her adoption of an African name and her interest in Islamic art indicate a quest for a grander, perhaps more exotic, cultural identity. However, her understanding often lacks the depth of lived experience.

Maggie: The Shy Survivor and Embodiment of Lived History

Maggie, scarred physically and emotionally by the house fire that also claimed her sister, is the quiet, unassuming counterpart to her more assertive sister. She embodies a deep, almost instinctual, connection to her heritage. While she may not articulate her feelings eloquently, her reverence for the quilts and her understanding of their creation are profound. Maggie represents the continuity of tradition, the unadorned inheritance passed down through generations. Her quiet strength and her genuine appreciation for the objects' true meaning highlight the limitations of Dee's more superficial engagement.

The Significance of Heritage and Identity in "Everyday Use"

At its core, "Everyday Use" is a powerful exploration of how individuals forge their identities through their connection to heritage. Alice Walker uses the contrasting approaches of Dee and Maggie to showcase the multifaceted nature of this connection. Is heritage something to be studied and admired from afar, or is it something to be lived, felt, and actively integrated into one's daily existence? The story suggests that true appreciation of one's lineage lies not in superficial adornment or academic study alone, but in the embodied memory and the practical application of traditions.

Symbolism in "Everyday Use": Objects as Cultural Anchors

Alice Walker masterfully employs symbolism in "Everyday Use" to convey the story's complex themes. The objects within Mama's home are not merely possessions; they are imbued with the memories, struggles, and triumphs of the family's ancestors. These artifacts serve as tangible links to the past, and the characters' differing interpretations of these symbols reveal their unique relationships with their heritage.

The Quilts: More Than Just Fabric

The handmade quilts are undoubtedly the most potent symbols in "Everyday Use." Pieced together from scraps of old clothing belonging to various family members, including John Hardy, a slave ancestor, they represent generations of creativity, resilience, and love. For Mama and Maggie, the quilts are functional and cherished items, meant to be used for warmth and comfort, continuing the tradition of their creation. For Dee, they are museum-worthy artifacts, representing an aesthetic and historical value that she wishes to preserve and display, separated from their original purpose.

The Dasher and Churn: Echoes of Labor and Survival

Other objects, such as the dasher and churn used for making butter, also carry significant symbolic weight. These tools represent the labor and resourcefulness of Mama's ancestors, highlighting their ability to create and sustain life through hard work. Dee's desire to use these as decorative items, a notion Mama finds absurd, further underscores the divide between her academic understanding and Mama's lived experience.

Themes Explored in the Short Story

"Everyday Use" is rich with interwoven themes that speak to the broader African American experience and universal human concerns. Alice Walker deftly explores these ideas through the interactions and inner monologues of her characters, making the narrative both relatable and intellectually stimulating.

Cultural Identity and Authenticity

The story grapples with the question of what constitutes authentic cultural identity. Is it found in adopting outward symbols and academic knowledge of one's heritage, as Dee attempts? Or is it rooted in the lived experiences, the oral traditions, and the practical skills passed down through generations, as embodied by Maggie and Mama? Walker seems to suggest that the latter provides a more profound and authentic connection.

The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

The narrative also highlights the tension between preserving traditions and embracing modernity. Dee's embrace of her new identity and her desire to preserve the past in a specific, modern way clashes with Mama's more fluid, utilitarian approach to tradition. This conflict is a reflection of the societal shifts occurring during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras.

Family Relationships and Understanding

The complex relationship between Mama and her daughters, and between the sisters themselves, is central to the story. Mama's love for both daughters is evident, yet she struggles to understand Dee's radical transformation. The story explores the challenges of intergenerational communication and the difficulty of bridging different perspectives within a family.

The Quilt as a Central Symbol: A Legacy Woven

The quilts in "Everyday Use" are more than just pieces of cloth; they are intricate tapestries woven with the threads of family history, memory, and resilience. Their significance transcends their material value, serving as the focal point of the story's central conflict and thematic concerns. Alice Walker uses the quilts to illustrate the differing ways heritage is perceived and valued.

Craftsmanship and Ancestral Connection

The quilts were made by Mama's mother and grandmother, pieced together from scraps of cherished family clothing. These scraps include Grandpa Barrel's shirts, Great Uncle's Sunday suit, and even scraps from the dresses worn by the girls' mother and aunt. This deep personal history embedded within the fabric creates a direct, tangible link to their ancestors. For Mama and

Maggie, this connection is sacred, a continuation of a skill and a love for craftsmanship.

Usage vs. Display: The Core of the Debate

The crucial difference in understanding arises when Dee declares her intention to make a "spectacle" out of the quilts, to hang them on the wall. Mama is appalled, stating that they are meant to be used, to be "passed down just like handed-down prayers." This dichotomy between using the quilts for everyday warmth and comfort, and displaying them as museum pieces, encapsulates the story's core argument about heritage. For Mama and Maggie, heritage is alive and meant to be lived; for Dee, it is an artifact to be preserved and showcased.

Literary Devices and Narrative Style

Alice Walker's skillful use of literary devices and her narrative style are instrumental in shaping the impact and depth of "Everyday Use." The story's power lies not only in its thematic content but also in how it is told.

First-Person Narration: Mama's Voice

The choice of Mama as the first-person narrator is crucial. Her voice is direct, unpretentious, and deeply authentic. Her grounded perspective allows the reader to experience the events and understand the characters through her eyes. Her observations are often tinged with a subtle humor and a profound maternal love, even for Dee, whom she struggles to comprehend.

Dialogue as a Character Revealer

The dialogue in "Everyday Use" is highly effective in revealing character and driving the plot. Dee's elaborate pronouncements and her educated, often affected, speech stand in stark contrast to Maggie's shy, minimal responses and Mama's more colloquial language. The way each character speaks not only reflects their personality but also their upbringing and their current worldview.

Imagery and Sensory Details

Walker employs vivid imagery and sensory details to bring the rural setting and the characters' lives to life. Descriptions of the "dusty" yard, the "milky" churn, and the "patchwork" quilts create a rich, tactile experience for the reader. These details also serve to emphasize the tangible nature of the heritage that Mama and Maggie cherish.

Understanding Dee's Transformation: A Rejection and Reclamation

Dee's metamorphosis into Wangero is a pivotal element in "Everyday Use," representing a complex and often debated aspect of cultural identity. Her journey highlights the allure of reclaiming one's heritage, but also the potential pitfalls of superficial engagement.

The Influence of the Black Power Movement

Dee's name change and her newfound interest in African culture are directly influenced by the intellectual and political currents of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the Black Power movement. This era saw many African Americans seeking to reconnect with their African roots and reject the imposed identities of slavery and systemic oppression. Dee's actions can be seen as an attempt to reclaim a lost heritage and assert a new, empowered identity.

Aesthetic vs. Experiential Connection

However, Dee's connection to her heritage appears to be largely aesthetic and intellectual rather than experiential. She admires the idea of her ancestors and their creations, but she doesn't truly understand or value the lived realities behind them. Her desire to possess and display the quilts, rather than to use them, exemplifies this disconnect. She wants to own the narrative without truly inhabiting it.

Maggie's Connection to Her Heritage: The Quiet Continuity

Maggie, in contrast to her sister, represents the quiet, enduring strength of tradition passed down through lived experience. Her connection to heritage is not performative but deeply ingrained.

The Scars of History

Maggie's physical and emotional scars from the house fire are a visible manifestation of the trauma and hardship her family has endured. These scars, ironically, make her the more authentic inheritor of the family's legacy, as she carries the physical and emotional weight of their past. Her shy demeanor and her reverence for the quilts demonstrate a deep respect for the hands that made them and the stories they tell.

Understanding Through Action, Not Words

While Maggie is not as articulate as Dee, her understanding of the quilts is profound. She knows their history, she can identify the fabrics, and she recognizes their true value as items meant for use. Her quiet possession of the quilts, a silent act of defiance against Dee's claims, speaks volumes about her deep, internal connection to her heritage.

Mama's Role as the Narrator and Moral Compass

Mama's position as the narrator in "Everyday Use" is central to the story's thematic development and its moral center. Her perspective guides the reader's understanding and shapes the ultimate resolution of the conflict.

The Voice of Reason and Experience

Mama's narration provides a grounded and realistic viewpoint. She is practical, hardworking, and deeply loving, despite her limitations in understanding Dee's new ideology. Her internal monologue reveals her confusion and her pain at the distance between her daughters, but it also demonstrates her unwavering commitment to her family.

The Decision-Maker

Ultimately, Mama is the one who makes the crucial decision regarding the quilts. Her final act of giving the quilts to Maggie, stating that Maggie "can have them too," is a powerful affirmation of her values. It is a declaration that true heritage is not for display but for use and for those who understand its deepest meaning. This decision solidifies her role as the moral compass of the story.

The "Everyday Use" Philosophy: Living History

The phrase "everyday use" itself becomes a philosophical statement within Alice Walker's narrative. It encapsulates a way of life, a philosophy of heritage that prioritizes living history over mere preservation.

Heritage as a Living Entity

The story posits that heritage is not a static artifact to be admired from a distance but a dynamic, living entity that should be integrated into one's daily existence. The quilts, for instance, are not just historical objects; they are meant to provide warmth, comfort, and a continuous connection to the past through their practical application.

Authenticity in Utility

Walker suggests that authenticity in connecting with one's heritage lies in its practical utility and its emotional resonance, rather than in academic knowledge or superficial adornment. Maggie's simple, heartfelt understanding and Mama's pragmatic approach are presented as more genuine forms of heritage appreciation than Dee's intellectualized and aestheticized view.

Intergenerational Conflict and Understanding

The generational divide is a significant aspect of "Everyday Use," mirroring broader societal shifts and the evolving understanding of identity within the African American community.

Bridging the Gap

The story highlights the challenges of bridging the gap between generations, especially when those generations have vastly different life experiences and cultural influences. Mama's struggle to comprehend Dee's choices, and Dee's apparent disdain for her mother's simple life, underscore the difficulty of mutual understanding.

The Legacy of the Past

While there is conflict, there is also an underlying hope for continuity. Mama's final act of giving the quilts to Maggie suggests that the true legacy of the family is preserved and will be carried forward by those who understand its meaning. This is a testament to the enduring power of familial bonds and the transmission of cultural values.

Alice Walker's Broader Social Commentary

"Everyday Use" transcends a simple family drama; it serves as a powerful social commentary on the African American experience and the complexities of cultural identity in post-slavery America.

The Search for Identity in a Post-Slavery World

The story reflects the ongoing search for identity and cultural validation among African Americans. Dee's embrace of her African heritage and her rejection of her given name can be seen as a response to the historical erasure of African culture and identity imposed by slavery. However, Walker subtly critiques the potential for this reclamation to become superficial or divorced from lived experience.

Critique of Intellectualism vs. Experience

Walker also offers a nuanced critique of the tendency for intellectualism or academic knowledge to sometimes overshadow or devalue lived experience. While Dee's education provides her with a framework for understanding her heritage, it also, paradoxically, disconnects her from its essence. The story champions the wisdom and value found in the experiences of ordinary people, like Mama and Maggie.

Critical Reception and Enduring Relevance

Since its publication, "Everyday Use" has been widely celebrated and analyzed, cementing its place as a significant work in American literature. Its themes continue to resonate with readers and scholars alike.

Literary Acclaim

The story has been lauded for its insightful character development, its rich

symbolism, and its eloquent exploration of profound themes. It is frequently anthologized and studied in literature courses, offering a vital perspective on African American culture and history.

Contemporary Relevance

The questions Alice Walker raises about heritage, identity, and cultural authenticity remain relevant today. In an increasingly globalized world, people continue to grapple with how to connect with their roots, how to define their cultural selves, and how to balance the past with the present. The story's enduring power lies in its ability to provoke thought and encourage personal reflection on these fundamental human concerns.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'?

The central theme of 'Everyday Use' revolves around the conflict between heritage as a living tradition and heritage as a superficial display or commodity. It explores how different members of a family, particularly Dee (Wangero) and her mother and sister Maggie, have contrasting views on preserving and valuing their African American heritage.

How does Alice Walker use symbolism in 'Everyday Use'?

Walker employs powerful symbolism, most notably through the quilts. The quilts represent tangible links to the family's past, the labor of ancestors (especially Grandma Dee), and the oral traditions passed down. Dee wants to 'preserve' them as art objects, while Maggie and her mother see them as functional items imbued with memory and love.

What is the significance of the character Dee's transformation into Wangero?

Dee's renaming to Wangero signifies her rejection of her African American roots and her embrace of a superficial, adopted African identity. This change highlights her disconnection from her true heritage and her family's lived experience, as she seeks to reclaim a romanticized, externalized version of 'blackness'.

What does the story suggest about the definition of 'heritage'?

'Everyday Use' suggests that true heritage is not about external appearances or decorative objects, but about lived experiences, familial bonds, and the practical application of traditions passed down through generations. It's about living with and honoring the past, not just displaying it.

How does Walker portray the character of Maggie?

Maggie is portrayed as shy, humble, and physically scarred, but she is deeply connected to her family's past. She represents an understanding of heritage that is rooted in memory, hard work, and the emotional value of objects, rather than their aesthetic or monetary worth.

What is the meaning of the title 'Everyday Use' in the context of the story?

The title 'Everyday Use' directly contrasts with Dee's desire to put the quilts on display. It emphasizes the value of heritage as something that is integrated into daily life, cherished and used, rather than being relegated to a museum or a purely aesthetic purpose. It's about the practical continuation of traditions.

What is the underlying message about authenticity and cultural appropriation in 'Everyday Use'?

The story critiques a form of cultural appropriation where an individual adopts elements of a culture without understanding or respecting its origins and lived context. Dee's actions are seen as appropriating superficial aspects of African culture while discarding her own family's genuine history and the people who lived it.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles that, while not directly "everyday use by Alice Walker analysis," touch upon themes and contexts relevant to understanding and analyzing such a work:

1. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. This novel, also by Alice Walker, explores themes of Black womanhood, resilience, and the search for identity in the American South. Its narrative delves into the complexities of family relationships, spiritual awakening, and overcoming abuse, offering a rich backdrop for understanding Walker's broader thematic concerns.
2. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker. This collection of essays is fundamental to understanding Walker's "womanist" philosophy. It examines the legacy of Black women artists and thinkers,

highlighting their creativity and contributions despite societal oppression.

3. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. While by a different author, this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel confronts the brutal legacy of slavery and its lasting impact on individuals and communities. It explores memory, trauma, and the struggle for healing, resonating with the historical and emotional weight present in Walker's work.

4. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. This seminal work follows Janie Crawford's journey toward self-discovery and independence in early 20th-century Florida. The novel's focus on dialect, cultural preservation, and a woman's quest for her own voice makes it a significant companion to analyzing similar themes in "Everyday Use."

5. *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This collection of short stories explores the experiences of Nigerian immigrants and their lives in America, touching on themes of identity, displacement, and cultural clashes. It provides a contemporary perspective on the negotiation of heritage and belonging.

6. *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. This groundbreaking play centers on a Black family in Chicago and their dreams for a better future. It examines the importance of heritage, family legacy, and the struggle for economic and social mobility, offering insights into the values passed down through generations.

7. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Morrison's debut novel probes the devastating effects of internalized racism and the damaging standards of beauty imposed by society. It explores the vulnerability of youth and the search for self-worth in a world that devalues Blackness, providing context for the societal pressures faced by characters in Walker's stories.

8. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life* by Valerie Boyd. This biography offers a comprehensive look at the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance and an influential writer for Alice Walker. Understanding Hurston's cultural context and artistic philosophy illuminates the literary lineage that informed "Everyday Use."

9. *The Homeplace: The African American Diaspora and the African American Novel* by Brenda Wade. This academic work delves into the concept of the "homeplace" in African American literature, exploring its significance as a site of resistance, cultural preservation, and personal identity. It offers critical frameworks for analyzing the symbolic and literal meanings of home within literary narratives.

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