

everyday use by alice walker sparknotes

Everyday Use by Alice Walker SparkNotes is a vital resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Alice Walker's powerful short story. This comprehensive guide delves into the narrative's core themes, character analyses, historical context, and literary devices, offering insightful explanations that illuminate the story's enduring relevance. We will explore the contrasting philosophies of Dee and Maggie, the symbolic significance of the quilts, and the broader implications of heritage and identity as presented by Walker. Understanding "Everyday Use" through the lens of SparkNotes provides invaluable context for students, educators, and literature enthusiasts alike.

Understanding Alice Walker's "Everyday Use": A Comprehensive SparkNotes Guide

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A Deep Dive into "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker

Alice Walker's acclaimed short story, "Everyday Use," first published in her 1973 collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, stands as a profound exploration of African American heritage, family relationships, and differing perspectives on cultural preservation. The narrative, set in the rural South during the Civil Rights era, centers on Mama, her physically scarred daughter Maggie, and her educated, estranged daughter Dee (who has renamed herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo). Through their interactions and differing values, Walker masterfully dissects the complex question of what truly constitutes heritage and how it should be honored. The story's enduring power lies in its relatable characters and its ability to spark meaningful conversations about identity and belonging.

Understanding the nuances of "Everyday Use" can be greatly enhanced by utilizing resources like SparkNotes. These guides offer detailed summaries, character analyses, thematic explorations, and contextual information that enrich a reader's comprehension. This article serves as a comprehensive guide, drawing on the insights typically found in SparkNotes to provide a thorough examination of Alice Walker's seminal work.

SparkNotes Summary and Plot Overview of "Everyday Use"

The SparkNotes approach to summarizing "Everyday Use" typically highlights the central conflict that unfolds when Dee, who has recently returned home with her new Muslim boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, encounters her mother and sister. The story is narrated from Mama's perspective, a pragmatic and

physically imposing woman who, along with Maggie, lives a simple life rooted in their heritage. Dee, now embracing a more outwardly sophisticated and politically charged identity, arrives with grand plans for the family heirlooms, particularly a set of hand-stitched quilts made by her grandmother and great-grandmother.

Dee views the quilts as art objects, intending to display them as artifacts of her heritage. Maggie, however, sees them as functional items, imbued with the love and labor of her ancestors, meant to be used and passed down through practical application. The climax of the story occurs when Dee attempts to take the quilts, but Mama, recognizing the deeper meaning of heritage that Maggie embodies, intervenes. Mama denies Dee the quilts, asserting that Maggie understands their true value. This pivotal moment underscores the story's central argument about the nature of heritage and the importance of lived experience over superficial appropriation.

Key Characters in "Everyday Use": Dee and Maggie

The brilliance of "Everyday Use" lies in its vividly drawn characters, each representing distinct facets of African American identity and cultural engagement. SparkNotes often emphasizes the contrasting personalities and philosophies of Dee and Maggie, highlighting their roles in the narrative's thematic development.

Dee: The Aspiring Intellectual and Cultural Appropriator

Dee, who renames herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, represents a segment of the Black community that, in the wake of the Black Power movement, sought to reconnect with African roots. Her transformation is marked by a new name, a new wardrobe, and an assertive, almost condescending, attitude towards her family's rural lifestyle and their perceived lack of cultural sophistication. Dee views her heritage through an external, academic lens. She sees the quilts, the butter churn, and the churn top as historical artifacts to be admired and displayed, rather than as functional items with personal significance. Her appreciation for her heritage is performative, detached from the everyday realities

and lived experiences of her family.

Her desire to take the quilts is driven by a need to possess and showcase her heritage in a way that aligns with her newfound identity, but it lacks the genuine emotional connection that her mother and sister share. This makes her a complex character, embodying both a genuine desire to connect with her past and a superficial misunderstanding of what that connection entails.

Maggie: The Quiet Survivor and Embodiment of Lived Heritage

Maggie is the antithesis of her sister. She is shy, introverted, and bears the physical and emotional scars of a house fire that claimed their childhood home and significantly injured her. Unlike Dee, Maggie is deeply connected to her family history not through intellectual pursuit but through emotional intimacy and shared experience. She cherishes the quilts because she remembers her grandmother painstakingly stitching them, and she understands their purpose as items to be used, loved, and continued. Maggie's quiet nature and deference to her mother mask a profound understanding of what heritage truly means.

Her connection to the past is organic and inherent; it is woven into the fabric of her being. She represents the silent strength and resilience of those who have lived through hardship and whose connection to their heritage is deeply personal and unpretentious. Maggie's quiet acceptance of the quilts, and her understanding of their practical value, signifies a more authentic form of cultural preservation.

Mama: The Pragmatic Narrator and Cultural Custodian

Mama, the narrator, serves as the moral compass of the story. She is a physically strong woman, accustomed to hard work, and possesses a grounded wisdom that comes from experience. She observes her daughters' contrasting views on heritage with a blend of love, exasperation, and quiet understanding. Mama is acutely aware of Dee's superficiality and Maggie's deep, albeit unarticulated, connection to their past. Her decision to protect the quilts for Maggie is an act of profound love and an

affirmation of her own values.

Mama's character embodies the enduring spirit of African American women who have maintained their families and cultures through immense challenges. Her pragmatic approach to life and heritage is a testament to the resilience and strength that define her community. She understands that heritage is not about mere display but about continuity and love.

Major Themes Explored in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker masterfully weaves several profound themes into the fabric of "Everyday Use," making it a story that resonates with readers on multiple levels. SparkNotes analysis typically highlights these central thematic concerns.

Heritage and Identity: What is True Preservation?

The most prominent theme in "Everyday Use" revolves around the differing interpretations of heritage and identity. Dee, with her adopted African name and her desire to treat heirlooms as museum pieces, represents a modern, perhaps external, approach to cultural identity. She seeks to define her heritage through symbols and declarations, separating it from the lived realities of her family. Maggie, on the other hand, embodies a more organic, internal connection to heritage, rooted in memory, love, and practical continuation. The story questions whether heritage is something to be preserved as an artifact or something to be lived and passed down through generations in a tangible, functional way. The conflict over the quilts directly addresses this central question.

The Contrast Between Intellectualism and Lived Experience

The story highlights the tension between intellectual understanding and lived experience. Dee, having attended college and become exposed to new ideas and movements, adopts a sophisticated, almost

academic, view of her heritage. She sees its value in its historical context and aesthetic appeal.

Maggie, who has not had the same educational opportunities, possesses an intuitive understanding of her heritage, derived from her direct experiences and memories of her elders. Mama, who bridges these two worlds, ultimately sides with the value of lived experience, recognizing that true connection is forged through love and memory, not just intellectual appreciation.

Family Relationships and Generational Differences

The complex dynamics within the Johnson family are central to the narrative. The estrangement between Mama and Dee, exacerbated by Dee's departure and subsequent intellectual awakening, creates a palpable tension. The story explores how generational shifts and differing life experiences can create rifts within families, even as a fundamental love remains. The interaction between Mama, Maggie, and Dee provides a poignant portrayal of these generational divides and the underlying bonds that tie them together, even amidst conflict.

The Meaning of "Everyday Use"

The title itself is a crucial thematic element. For Dee, her heritage is for "everyday use" in a symbolic or performative sense; it is something to be displayed and asserted. For Maggie and Mama, "everyday use" refers to the practical, loving application of heirlooms and traditions in their daily lives. The quilts, for instance, are meant to be used, to provide warmth, and to continue the legacy of their makers through their ongoing presence in the family's life. This contrast in understanding underscores the story's argument for a heritage that is lived, not just observed.

Symbolism in "Everyday Use": The Quilts and Beyond

Alice Walker employs rich symbolism in "Everyday Use" to convey her thematic concerns. SparkNotes guides often point to the quilts as the most significant symbol, but other elements also carry weight.

The Quilts: More Than Just Fabric

The hand-stitched quilts are the story's primary symbol, representing the tangible legacy of the Johnson family's ancestors and their enduring craftsmanship. Each patch in the quilts has a history, a story, and a connection to a specific relative. For Dee, they are art objects, to be admired from afar and preserved as relics of a past she feels detached from in its everyday form. For Maggie and Mama, the quilts are a source of warmth, comfort, and continuity; they are meant to be used, to keep them warm, and to be passed down, carrying the memories and love of generations. The act of using them is a form of honoring the people who made them, keeping their spirit alive in the present.

The Butter Churn and Churn Top: Symbols of Ancestral Labor

The butter churn and its top are also significant symbols. Dee wants to carve the churn top and use it as an art piece, much like she intends for the quilts. Mama, however, remembers her father carving the churn top by hand. This detail further emphasizes the value of skilled labor and the personal history embedded in everyday objects. For Maggie, these items represent the hard work and dedication of her ancestors, meant to serve a purpose in the continuing life of the family.

Dee's Appearance: A Symbol of Shifting Identity

Dee's physical transformation—her new name, her flowing African-inspired clothing, her dangling earrings—symbolizes her embrace of a particular, fashionable, and politicized version of Black identity. This outward display contrasts sharply with Mama and Maggie's more grounded and internally driven sense of self. Dee's adoption of an African name and her dismissal of her given name can be seen as an attempt to sever ties with a past she deems less significant, while paradoxically claiming to celebrate heritage.

The Scarred Hands and the Scars on Maggie's Back

The physical scars on Maggie's back, a result of the fire, are a potent symbol of trauma and resilience.

These scars are a physical manifestation of her lived experience, a testament to her survival. They also represent the enduring pain and memory of loss within the family. Mama's calloused, rough hands are a symbol of her lifetime of hard work and the practical, hands-on connection she has to her heritage and her family.

Historical and Cultural Context of "Everyday Use"

To fully appreciate "Everyday Use," understanding its historical and cultural backdrop is crucial. SparkNotes often situates the story within the broader context of African American history and the social movements of the mid-20th century.

The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Era

Alice Walker wrote "Everyday Use" during a pivotal period in American history, marked by the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the Black Power movement. These movements fostered a renewed interest in African heritage and a rejection of assimilationist pressures. Dee's embrace of African culture and her adoption of an African name can be seen as a reflection of this cultural awakening. However, Walker's story also offers a nuanced critique, suggesting that this re-engagement with heritage could sometimes lead to superficial adoption rather than deep understanding and lived practice.

The Rural Southern Black Experience

The story is deeply rooted in the experience of Black families in the rural South. Mama and Maggie's lifestyle, characterized by simple living, hard work, and a strong connection to family traditions, reflects the realities of many Black communities in that era. Walker, herself from the South, draws on this rich cultural landscape to create a story that is both specific and universal. The narrative captures the pride and resilience that characterized these communities, even in the face of poverty and historical

oppression.

Generational Shifts in Cultural Appreciation

The generational differences portrayed between Mama/Maggie and Dee reflect broader societal shifts. As younger generations sought to redefine their identities and reclaim their heritage, they sometimes clashed with the more traditional ways of their elders. "Everyday Use" captures this dynamic, illustrating how different generations may interpret and engage with their cultural legacy in distinct ways, leading to both conflict and the potential for intergenerational understanding.

Literary Devices Employed by Alice Walker

Alice Walker's skill as a writer is evident in her masterful use of literary devices in "Everyday Use." These techniques contribute significantly to the story's depth and impact.

First-Person Narration and Voice

The story is told from Mama's perspective, using a distinct and authentic voice. This first-person narration allows readers direct access to Mama's thoughts, feelings, and observations. Her voice is characterized by its simplicity, pragmatism, and underlying warmth. This narrative choice makes Mama a relatable and sympathetic character, drawing the reader into her world and her interpretation of events. Her plain-spoken yet insightful commentary shapes the reader's understanding of Dee and Maggie.

Irony

The story is rich with irony, particularly dramatic irony and situational irony. Dee, who accuses her family of not appreciating their heritage, is arguably the one who misunderstands its true essence. Her

educated pronouncements about heritage are contrasted with her superficial actions. The irony lies in her attempts to preserve something she doesn't truly comprehend, while Maggie, who seems to have less intellectual understanding, possesses the deepest connection. The situational irony is that Mama, who has always been the keeper of tradition, ultimately asserts a new understanding of how that tradition should be passed on.

Imagery

Walker uses vivid imagery to bring the setting and characters to life. Descriptions of Mama's "rough, calloused hands," the "hair as coarse as a horse's mane," and the "patchwork quilt" create sensory details that immerse the reader in the story's world. The imagery associated with the quilts—the specific fabrics and the memories they evoke—is particularly powerful in conveying their symbolic meaning.

Dialogue

The dialogue in "Everyday Use" is crucial in revealing character and driving the plot. The contrast between Dee's elaborate and sometimes pretentious language and Mama's more direct, earthy speech highlights their differing perspectives and social positions. The quiet, understated dialogue of Maggie also speaks volumes about her character and her deep feelings.

SparkNotes Analysis of "Everyday Use": Key Insights

SparkNotes often distills the core messages of "Everyday Use" into several key takeaways. These insights help readers grasp the story's enduring significance.

- **Heritage is Lived, Not Just Displayed:** The central argument is that true appreciation of heritage

involves incorporating it into one's life and passing it on through continued use and memory, rather than treating it as an object of display or academic study.

- **Authenticity Over Performance:** The story champions authenticity in cultural expression. Maggie's simple, heartfelt connection to her heritage is presented as more genuine than Dee's performative embrace of African symbols and ideals.
- **The Importance of Family History and Memory:** The quilts and other heirlooms are imbued with the memories and labor of ancestors, underscoring the value of remembering and honoring those who came before.
- **Understanding vs. Appropriation:** The story subtly critiques cultural appropriation, distinguishing between genuine engagement with heritage and the superficial taking of cultural symbols without understanding their deeper meaning or context.
- **Mama's Quiet Strength:** Mama's ultimate decision to protect the quilts for Maggie is a powerful act of agency and a validation of her own values and understanding of family legacy.

How to Use SparkNotes for "Everyday Use" Effectively

SparkNotes can be an invaluable tool for students and readers alike when approaching "Everyday Use." To maximize its utility, consider these strategies:

- **Read the story first:** Before diving into SparkNotes, read the story on your own to form your initial impressions and identify areas of confusion.
- **Use the plot summary for clarification:** If you found parts of the story difficult to follow, the plot

summary can help you piece together the sequence of events and understand the narrative arc.

- **Analyze character descriptions:** SparkNotes' character analyses can deepen your understanding of Dee, Maggie, and Mama, highlighting their motivations, complexities, and symbolic significance.
- **Explore thematic discussions:** The SparkNotes guides offer detailed explanations of the major themes, providing different interpretations and connections that you might not have initially considered.
- **Examine symbol explanations:** Understanding the symbolism, particularly of the quilts, is crucial. SparkNotes can offer detailed insights into how these symbols contribute to the story's overall meaning.
- **Review literary devices:** Familiarize yourself with the literary devices Walker uses and how they enhance the story's impact. SparkNotes can help you identify and understand these techniques.
- **Prepare for discussions or essays:** SparkNotes can provide excellent starting points for class discussions or essay writing, offering key points and evidence from the text.

By engaging with SparkNotes as a supplementary resource rather than a replacement for reading, you can significantly enhance your comprehension and appreciation of Alice Walker's masterful short story.

Further Reading and Resources for "Everyday Use"

For those who wish to delve even deeper into Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," a wealth of resources is available. Beyond SparkNotes, exploring critical essays, literary analyses, and other works by Alice Walker can provide a more comprehensive understanding of her literary contributions and the themes

she consistently explores.

- **Alice Walker's other works:** Reading her novels, such as *The Color Purple*, and her other short story collections can reveal recurring themes, stylistic patterns, and a deeper appreciation for her artistic vision.
- **Biographical information on Alice Walker:** Understanding her life experiences, her involvement in civil rights and feminist movements, and her personal connection to African American culture can shed light on the motivations behind her writing.
- **Critical essays and academic studies:** Scholarly articles and literary journals often offer in-depth analyses of "Everyday Use," exploring its nuances from various critical perspectives, including feminist, postcolonial, and cultural studies.
- **Historical accounts of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements:** Contextualizing the story within these periods of significant social and cultural change can provide a richer understanding of the historical forces shaping the characters' ideas and actions.
- **Discussions on cultural heritage and preservation:** Exploring broader conversations about how different cultures preserve and transmit their traditions can offer comparative insights into the themes presented in "Everyday Use."

By engaging with these diverse resources, readers can gain a more profound and multifaceted appreciation for the enduring power and significance of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The central theme of 'Everyday Uses' is the conflict between embracing one's heritage and trivializing it, often explored through the differing perspectives of Dee and Maggie on their family heirlooms.

How does Dee's character represent a disconnect from her heritage?

Dee, who renames herself 'Wangero Leewanika Kemanzo,' represents a disconnect by viewing her heritage as a collection of exotic artifacts to be displayed and admired, rather than as lived experiences and practical connections.

What is the significance of the quilts in 'Everyday Use'?

The quilts are a powerful symbol of the family's history and Grandma Dee's craftsmanship. Dee wants them for their aesthetic value, while Mama and Maggie understand their sentimental and practical importance, as they were made to be used.

What does Mama's final decision about the quilts reveal about her character?

Mama's decision to let Maggie have the quilts, despite Dee's earlier insistence, reveals her deep understanding of true heritage and her ability to see beyond superficial displays. She recognizes Maggie's genuine connection to their ancestors.

How does the story highlight the contrast between different ways of valuing family history?

The story contrasts Dee's intellectualized, almost performative appreciation of her heritage with Maggie's humble, lived experience and emotional connection to the objects that represent their past. This highlights that heritage is more than just artifacts.

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

The title 'Everyday Use' is ironic. Dee wants to preserve heirlooms as art, detached from daily life. Mama and Maggie, however, understand that the true value of these items lies in their continued, practical use, connecting the past to the present in an ongoing way.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to "Everyday Use by Alice Walker" that begin with "" and a short description for each:

- 1. In the Spirit of the Ancestors: Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and the African American Experience. This collection explores how "Everyday Use" serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the complex relationship between heritage, identity, and cultural appropriation within the African American community. It delves into the contrasting perspectives of Dee and Maggie, highlighting the enduring significance of lived experience and familial connection. The essays offer critical insights into how the past informs the present and shapes individual and collective identity.*
- 2. The Fabric of Memory: Quilts and Cultural Continuity in "Everyday Use". This book focuses on the central motif of the quilts in Alice Walker's story, analyzing their symbolic weight and their role in preserving family history and cultural memory. It discusses how the quilts represent a tangible link to the past and the women who created them. The analysis extends to how different generations interpret and value these heirlooms.*
- 3. Daughter of the Dust: Appalachian Stories and the Legacy of "Everyday Use". While not directly about "Everyday Use," this title suggests a thematic connection to the exploration of heritage, family legacies, and the struggle to preserve cultural identity in the face of modernization. It examines how stories and traditions are passed down, mirroring the tensions present in Walker's work. The book likely highlights the importance of understanding one's roots.*

4. *The Color Purple and the Politics of Heritage: Reconsidering "Everyday Use"*. This comparative study investigates the shared concerns of Alice Walker's celebrated novels, particularly their engagement with race, gender, and the reclamation of African American identity. It revisits "Everyday Use" through the broader context of Walker's oeuvre, emphasizing the political implications of valuing and preserving cultural heritage. The book likely draws parallels between the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery.

5. *Homegoing and the Echoes of "Everyday Use": Intergenerational Legacies*. This title implies an examination of how stories of family and ancestry, much like those in "Everyday Use," are transmitted across generations. It likely explores the impact of historical trauma and the ways in which individuals connect with their past. The book would consider the evolving understanding of heritage and belonging.

6. *The House on Mango Street and the Search for Self: Parallels with "Everyday Use"*. This work draws connections between Sandra Cisneros's iconic coming-of-age novel and Alice Walker's exploration of identity and belonging. It would highlight how both protagonists grapple with their cultural heritage and strive to define themselves within their communities. The book likely focuses on the domestic sphere as a site of personal growth and cultural negotiation.

7. *Beloved and the Weight of History: Reading "Everyday Use" Anew*. This literary analysis delves into how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" both confront the enduring impact of slavery and the complexities of memory. It would explore how characters in both works strive to reconcile their past with their present. The book likely emphasizes the significance of storytelling in healing and understanding.

8. *Their Eyes Were Watching God and the Poetics of Heritage: A Dialogue with "Everyday Use"*. This critical essay likely examines Zora Neale Hurston's portrayal of Janie Crawford's journey of self-discovery and connects it to the themes of cultural identity and heritage in "Everyday Use." It would explore how both narratives celebrate Black women's voices and their connection to their roots. The book might highlight the importance of dialect and lived experience.

9. *The Thing Around Your Neck and the Immigrant Experience: Revisiting "Everyday Use".* This collection of stories, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, offers a compelling exploration of cultural identity, displacement, and the negotiation of heritage, resonating with the core concerns of "Everyday Use." It examines how individuals maintain connections to their past while navigating new environments. The book likely showcases the universal struggles of belonging and self-definition.

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