

characters in everyday use by alice walker

The Enduring Power of Characterization: Exploring the Characters in Everyday Use by Alice Walker

Alice Walker's seminal short story, "Everyday Use," published in 1973, delves into the complexities of heritage, identity, and the differing interpretations of African American culture. At the heart of this powerful narrative are its vividly drawn characters, each representing distinct viewpoints on what it means to preserve and connect with one's past. This article will provide a comprehensive exploration of the central characters in "Everyday Use," examining their motivations, their relationships, and the profound symbolism they embody. We will unpack the nuanced portrayals of Mama, Dee (Wangero), and Maggie, understanding how their interactions illuminate Walker's central themes and contribute to the story's lasting impact. By dissecting these unforgettable characters, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the literary artistry of Alice Walker and the universal questions her work poses about heritage and belonging.

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Unveiling the Core: The Characters in Everyday Use by Alice Walker

Alice Walker's enduring short story, "Everyday Use," masterfully presents a compelling narrative through its distinct and unforgettable characters. The central figures – Mama, her elder daughter Dee (who renames herself Wangero), and her younger daughter Maggie –

serve as powerful embodiments of differing approaches to African American heritage and identity. The story's strength lies in Walker's ability to create relatable, complex individuals whose interactions highlight profound cultural and personal conflicts. Understanding the motivations and development of these characters is crucial to appreciating the story's deeper messages about tradition, heritage, and the very meaning of "everyday use." This exploration will delve into the intricate personalities and symbolic weight carried by each of the key characters in "Everyday Use."

Mama: The Keeper of Heritage and the Soul of the Home

The narrator of "Everyday Use," Mama, is the bedrock of the Johnson family and the narrative's moral compass. Her character is defined by a deep, practical connection to her family's history and the land they inhabit. Mama is a woman of resilience, strength, and unwavering love, whose life has been shaped by hard work and the tangible realities of survival in the rural South. Her physical presence, described as large and capable, mirrors her inner fortitude. She is the one who remembers the stories, the hard times, and the everyday practices that constitute her family's heritage. Her hands, calloused from manual labor, are a testament to a life lived in communion with the earth and the necessities of sustenance. Mama's perspective is grounded in the functional, the useful, and the sentimental value derived from objects that have served their purpose through generations.

Mama's Deep-Seated Connection to Heritage

Mama's understanding of heritage is not abstract or performative; it is woven into the fabric of her daily existence. The quilts, a central symbol in the story, are not merely artifacts to her but tangible links to her ancestors. She remembers the women who pieced them together, the scraps of fabric from her grandmother's dresses, and the purpose these quilts served in providing warmth and comfort. Her connection is visceral, rooted in memory, labor, and the love imbued in these objects. She sees the heritage in the worn seams and faded patterns, in the stories whispered through the touch of the fabric. This is a heritage meant to be lived with, to be used, to continue its function, much like the rest of her life is dedicated to practicality and providing.

Mama's Maternal Love and Protective Instincts

While Mama is a woman of few words, her love for her daughters is palpable. She clearly dotes on Maggie, the daughter who stayed and endured the hardship with her. Her feelings towards Dee are more complex, marked by a mixture of disappointment and a lingering hope for her eldest daughter's well-being. Mama's protective instincts are most evident when she perceives Dee's intentions regarding the quilts as exploitative rather than appreciative. She stands firm against Dee's attempt to take the quilts, recognizing that Dee

misunderstands and devalues the true meaning of their heritage. This act of defiance is a powerful assertion of Mama's understanding of family legacy and her role as its guardian.

Mama's Practicality vs. Dee's Aestheticism

The fundamental conflict in "Everyday Use" is often illustrated through Mama's practicality versus Dee's newfound aestheticism. Mama views the quilts as functional items, meant to be used and enjoyed in the everyday living of life. Dee, on the other hand, sees them as artistic artifacts, to be admired, displayed, and preserved in a museum-like fashion, detached from their original purpose and the hands that made them. Mama's perspective is one of continuity and living memory, where heritage is a dynamic force that continues to be part of life. Dee's perspective is one of separation and commodification, where heritage becomes a curated object of veneration.

Dee (Wangero) and Her Evolving Identity

Dee, or Wangero as she insists on being called, represents a significant turning point in how African Americans grappled with their identity following the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black consciousness. Her character is characterized by a dramatic shift in her outward presentation and her intellectualized approach to her heritage. Upon her return to her family home, Dee appears transformed, sporting African attire, elaborately beaded hair, and an affected accent. This superficial adoption of African culture is presented as a stark contrast to the lived experience of her family.

The Renaming: A Symbol of Rejection and Reclamation

Dee's decision to change her name from the one her aunt died for, to "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo," is a pivotal moment. This act signifies a rejection of her given name and, by extension, the oppressive history it represents – a history of slavery and forced assimilation. However, the way she reclaims her identity is presented as superficial by Mama. While the desire to connect with African roots is understandable and important, Dee's approach is seen as an external performance rather than an internalized understanding. She seeks an exoticized version of her heritage, disconnected from the struggles and realities of her immediate family.

Dee's Intellectualization of Heritage

Dee's understanding of heritage is intellectual and academic, influenced by her education. She has learned about her ancestry through books and lectures, leading her to believe that she is the most qualified to preserve it. This intellectualism, however, blinds her to the living heritage that exists within her own family. She views the quilts and other heirlooms as objects of art to be displayed and studied, rather than as functional items that carry the

warmth and memories of her grandmother and great-grandmother. Her desire to take the quilts for her own apartment is a clear manifestation of this detachment; she wants to possess them as cultural artifacts, not to continue their legacy.

Dee's Disconnect from Family and Reality

A significant aspect of Dee's character is her palpable disconnect from her family and their everyday reality. She arrives with a boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, who is equally detached from the rural Southern life. Dee seems embarrassed by her mother and sister, viewing their simple way of life as primitive. This disconnect is not just physical; it is emotional and cultural. She fails to acknowledge the sacrifices her mother has made or the quiet dignity of her sister. Her interaction with them is more like an anthropologist observing a subject than a daughter reconnecting with her family. This makes her quest to preserve heritage feel hollow and self-serving.

Maggie: The Quiet Strength and Living Memory

Maggie, the younger of the two sisters, stands in stark contrast to Dee. She is portrayed as shy, timid, and physically scarred from a childhood house fire that also claimed the lives of her father and brother. Despite her apparent fragility, Maggie embodies a deep, innate connection to her family's heritage, a connection that is expressed through her quiet demeanor and her profound respect for her elders and their traditions.

Maggie's Deep Reverence for Family History

Maggie's reverence for her family history is understated but profoundly felt. Unlike Dee, who intellectualizes and renames, Maggie cherishes the memories and the tangible remnants of her past in a way that is both humble and genuine. She remembers her grandmother's stories and the skill with which she made the quilts. Her quietness suggests a deep inner life and an ability to absorb and internalize the essence of her heritage. She doesn't need to perform her connection; it is an intrinsic part of who she is. Her respect for the quilts is evident in her willingness to use them as intended, a continuation of their purpose.

Maggie as the Embodiment of Resilience

The childhood trauma Maggie endured, the fire that left her physically and emotionally scarred, speaks to her immense resilience. She has survived, and in her survival, she carries the weight of memory and loss. This resilience makes her a powerful symbol of enduring spirit. While Dee seeks to distance herself from the past by erasing and transforming it, Maggie embraces it, scars and all. Her quiet strength is not about grand gestures but about a steady, internal fortitude that allows her to carry on and honor the

past through her very being. She is a living testament to the enduring power of family and tradition.

Maggie's Quiet Understanding and Acceptance

Maggie's quiet nature allows her to observe and understand the world around her, including the complexities of her family dynamics. She listens to her mother's unspoken feelings and seems to intuit the true value of the quilts. When Mama makes the decision to give the quilts to Maggie, it is a recognition of Maggie's unpretentious reverence. Maggie's acceptance of the quilts, not as artifacts but as heirlooms to be used and cherished, signifies her understanding of true heritage. Her quiet demeanor belies a deep wisdom and an acceptance of her lineage, a stark contrast to Dee's performative reclamation.

The Interplay of Characters and Their Symbolic Meanings

The true brilliance of "Everyday Use" lies in the dynamic interplay between its central characters, each representing distinct facets of African American identity and the struggle to define and preserve heritage. Alice Walker masterfully uses these characters to explore the nuances of cultural memory, the impact of historical oppression, and the varying ways individuals connect with their ancestry.

Mama as the Bridge Between Generations

Mama serves as the vital bridge between the past and the present, and potentially between the two sisters' differing viewpoints. She is rooted in the traditions passed down by her own mother and grandmother, embodying the practical, lived experience of heritage. Her understanding is that heritage is not static but a living entity to be nurtured and continued. Her internal conflict stems from seeing her daughters interpret this heritage so differently, highlighting the challenges of cultural transmission across generations and in the face of societal change.

Dee vs. Maggie: The Conflict of Heritage Interpretation

The central conflict is most vividly illustrated through the contrasting approaches of Dee and Maggie towards their heritage. Dee's new identity, Wangero, represents an attempt to distance herself from the perceived stigmas of her past and to embrace a more romanticized, externalized version of African heritage. She sees the quilts as aesthetic objects worthy of preservation in a detached manner. Maggie, on the other hand, embodies the quiet, enduring connection to heritage through her respect for its functionality and the memories it holds. Her willingness to use the quilts represents a continuity of tradition, a

living legacy.

The Quilts as a Symbol of Tangible Heritage

The quilts are the most potent symbol in the story, acting as a focal point for the characters' differing values. For Mama and Maggie, they are functional heirlooms, imbued with the love and labor of ancestors, meant to be used and passed down. For Dee, they are art objects, museum pieces that she wishes to possess and display, thereby severing them from their living history and practical purpose. The struggle over the quilts is a microcosm of the larger debate about how to honor and engage with cultural heritage – whether it should be lived and used or preserved and admired from a distance.

Thematic Resonance Through Character Relationships

The relationships between Mama, Dee, and Maggie are crucial to the story's thematic resonance. Mama's love for both daughters, coupled with her clear understanding of their differing values, highlights the complexities of family and the weight of cultural inheritance. Dee's superficial engagement with her heritage and her condescension towards her family underscore the dangers of cultural appropriation and the disconnect that can arise from education and societal influence. Maggie's quiet strength and acceptance represent an authentic, internalized connection to ancestry, suggesting that true heritage is often found in simplicity and genuine appreciation.

Alice Walker's Crafting of Memorable Characters

Alice Walker's skill as a storyteller is profoundly evident in her masterful creation of the characters in "Everyday Use." She avoids simplistic archetypes, instead crafting individuals who are complex, relatable, and deeply symbolic, each contributing to the story's rich tapestry of meaning. Her nuanced approach ensures that each character, regardless of their role, leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

Authentic Voice and Dialogue

Walker imbues each character with a distinct and authentic voice, particularly evident in their dialogue. Mama's colloquialisms and direct speech reflect her rural upbringing and no-nonsense attitude. Dee's language is more performative, peppered with pronouncements and educated vocabulary, often used to emphasize her intellectual superiority and newfound identity. Maggie's limited dialogue, punctuated by hesitant utterances, effectively conveys her shyness and introverted nature. This careful attention to linguistic detail makes the characters feel vividly real.

Psychological Depth and Motivation

Beyond their surface traits, Walker delves into the psychological depths of her characters, revealing their underlying motivations. Mama's protectiveness of Maggie, her weariness with Dee, and her quiet certainty about her own values all stem from a lifetime of experience and a deep understanding of her family's history. Dee's transformation and her desire to "save" her heritage can be interpreted as a response to societal pressures and a complex search for identity in a post-civil rights era. Maggie's quietness, while partly due to trauma, also signifies a profound internal strength and a wisdom that transcends outward expression.

Symbolic Representation of Cultural Movements

Each character can also be seen as representing different aspects of the African American experience and cultural evolution. Mama embodies the enduring spirit of the rural, working-class Black community, deeply connected to its roots. Dee, with her embrace of Africanisms and her re-naming, reflects the Black Power movement and the intellectual re-evaluation of identity and heritage that occurred during that period. Maggie represents the quiet resilience and the unarticulated wisdom that often underlies the outward expressions of culture, suggesting that heritage is not always loud or performative.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Characters in "Everyday Use"

In conclusion, the characters in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" are more than just individuals within a narrative; they are powerful archetypes and profound symbols that illuminate the enduring complexities of heritage, identity, and cultural memory. Mama, with her grounded practicality and deep love, represents the steadfast keeper of tradition. Dee (Wangero), with her dramatic transformation, embodies the intellectual reclamation and potential pitfalls of superficial cultural engagement. Maggie, the quiet survivor, showcases the resilience and unpretentious reverence for lineage that often lies beneath the surface. The dynamic interplay between these three women, particularly their contrasting views on the significance and use of family heirlooms like the quilts, provides a powerful commentary on how African American culture is understood, valued, and preserved. Alice Walker's masterful characterization ensures that the central themes of "Everyday Use" continue to resonate, offering readers a timeless exploration of what it truly means to connect with and honor one's ancestry.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme explored through the characters in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'?

The central theme explored through the characters in 'Everyday Use' is the conflict between superficial appreciation of heritage and a deeper, lived understanding of one's roots and family history. This is embodied by the contrasting perspectives of Mama/Maggie and Dee.

How does Dee (Wangero) represent a different approach to heritage compared to Mama and Maggie?

Dee represents a more outward, intellectual, and performative approach to heritage. She seeks to 'preserve' and 'display' her heritage through artifacts like the quilts, detaching them from their practical use and the people who made them. Mama and Maggie, in contrast, understand heritage as a lived experience, woven into their everyday lives and the memories associated with the objects.

What does the contrast between Maggie and Dee reveal about the meaning of heritage for different generations?

The contrast highlights how heritage can be interpreted differently across generations. Maggie, having directly experienced the hardships and traditions of her ancestors, embodies a natural, unforced connection. Dee, educated and influenced by external movements, adopts a more curated and academic understanding, sometimes bordering on appropriation, to assert her identity.

How does Mama's character evolve or demonstrate her understanding of heritage throughout the story?

Mama's character demonstrates a quiet but firm understanding of heritage. Initially, she feels inadequate compared to Dee's education and sophistication. However, by the end, she asserts her own judgment and authority, recognizing that the true value of her heritage lies in its continuity and living use, not in being a museum piece. She ultimately sides with Maggie, the keeper of living memory.

What is the symbolic significance of the quilts in 'Everyday Use' and how do the characters interact with them differently?

The quilts are highly symbolic, representing the tangible legacy of family history, hard work, and love. Dee sees them as art objects to be displayed, wanting to hang them. Maggie, on the other hand, understands their purpose as practical and sentimental, wanting to use them as quilts, just as her ancestors did, thus continuing their legacy through use and memory.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the themes, characters, and spirit of Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*, with short descriptions:

1. *The Quilting Bee: Threads of Legacy*

This novel follows a family matriarch as she passes down her prized quilting skills to her granddaughters. It explores the unspoken language of craftsmanship, the weight of history woven into fabric, and the generational dialogue that unfolds through shared creation. The story highlights how tradition can be both a source of connection and a point of contention as younger generations forge their own identities.

2. *Mama's Hands, Grandmama's Wisdom*

This collection of essays and oral histories delves into the lives of African American women who preserved their heritage through domestic arts and storytelling. It showcases the resilience and ingenuity of women who transformed everyday objects into symbols of cultural endurance. The book emphasizes the power of passed-down knowledge and the often-unsung labor that sustains families and communities.

3. *The Yardstick of Memory*

This historical fiction piece is set in the rural South during the Jim Crow era, focusing on a young woman who grapples with her family's past and her own sense of belonging. She discovers hidden stories within heirlooms and photographs, realizing that tangible objects hold the keys to understanding her identity. The narrative explores the complex relationship between personal history and collective memory.

4. *Beneath the Peach Tree's Shadow*

This coming-of-age story centers on a young girl's evolving understanding of her family's history and culture, as told through the lens of the natural world around her. The peach tree becomes a powerful symbol of continuity, growth, and the cyclical nature of life and tradition. It captures the subtle ways in which heritage is absorbed and interpreted by a new generation.

5. *The Unravelling of Satin*

This literary mystery investigates the disappearance of a valuable family heirloom, a silk scarf passed down through generations. As the protagonist searches for the missing item, she uncovers long-held family secrets and differing perspectives on what constitutes true value. The story examines the emotional and historical significance of material possessions and the tensions they can create.

6. *Salt of the Earth, Bread of Life*

This memoir recounts the author's experiences growing up in a working-class family, where food preparation and shared meals were central to their cultural identity. The book highlights the sacredness of everyday rituals and the wisdom embedded in ancestral recipes. It celebrates the strength derived from simple sustenance and the deep bonds forged around the kitchen table.

7. *The Weight of the Worn Bible*

This novel follows a descendant of a formerly enslaved family as she inherits her ancestor's worn Bible. The book explores the profound spiritual and historical significance of this object, and how it becomes a catalyst for confronting generational trauma and reclaiming a

narrative of survival. It examines the power of faith and the enduring legacy of resilience.

8. Generational Echoes: The Art of the Everyday

This anthology features short stories and poems by various authors reflecting on the meaning and preservation of family heirlooms. Each piece offers a unique perspective on how objects, from simple tools to cherished photographs, carry the weight of collective experience and shape individual identities. The collection celebrates the diverse ways people connect with their past.

9. The Kinship of the Loom

This novel tells the story of two sisters with contrasting approaches to their family's artistic heritage, specifically their grandmother's weaving. One embraces the tradition with reverence, while the other sees it as an outdated relic. Their conflict forces them to confront their differing values and the true meaning of legacy in a changing world.

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