

everyday use by alice walker

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use": A Deep Dive into Heritage, Identity, and African American Culture

Introduction

Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" is a profound exploration of African American heritage, identity, and the complex relationship between the past and the present. Through the contrasting characters of Mama, Dee (later Wangero), and Maggie, Walker masterfully illustrates divergent approaches to cultural preservation and understanding. The story delves into what it truly means to cherish ancestral objects and traditions, questioning whether appreciation lies in display or in the lived experience of carrying forward a legacy. This article will provide a comprehensive analysis of "Everyday Use by Alice Walker," examining its central themes, character dynamics, symbolic elements, and enduring relevance in understanding African American cultural identity and the importance of ancestral connection. We will explore how Walker uses these elements to provoke thought about the meaning of heritage in a contemporary world.

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Alice Walker's "Everyday Use": A Foundational African American Narrative

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" stands as a pivotal work within the landscape of African

American literature. Published in 1973, this short story, featured in her collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, resonates deeply with readers due to its insightful portrayal of family dynamics, cultural heritage, and the search for identity. Walker, a celebrated author known for her commitment to exploring the experiences of Black women, crafts a narrative that is both intimate and universal. The story's focus on the nuances of preserving and valuing ancestral artifacts highlights a crucial aspect of the African American experience: the reclaiming and redefinition of heritage in the aftermath of slavery and systemic oppression. "Everyday Use" challenges conventional notions of what it means to honor the past, suggesting that true appreciation is rooted in continued use and lived connection rather than mere aesthetic admiration.

Understanding the Core Conflict in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker

The central conflict in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is not one of external antagonism but rather an internal, ideological struggle waged within a family unit. It pits two fundamentally different approaches to heritage against each other, embodied by the sisters Dee and Maggie, and mediated by their mother, Mama. Dee, having received an education and adopted a new name, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, returns home with a romanticized and commodified view of her ancestry. She desires to preserve family heirlooms as museum pieces, detached from their original context and intended purpose. In contrast, Maggie, who has lived a life steeped in the traditions and hardship of her ancestors, represents a more organic and lived understanding of heritage. Her connection to the quilts, for instance, is not as an artifact to be displayed but as a living testament to the skill, labor, and love of her foremothers. Mama, caught between her daughters' perspectives, ultimately makes a choice that reflects her own deeply ingrained values.

The Intergenerational Divide in Cultural Appreciation

The story vividly illustrates an intergenerational divide in how cultural heritage is perceived and valued. Dee, representing a generation perhaps more removed from the immediate struggles of slavery and the Great Migration, seeks to embrace an idealized version of her African roots, often through external symbols. Her transformation and adoption of an African name symbolize a rejection of the past that was imposed upon her ancestors and a conscious effort to connect with a broader African identity. However, Walker subtly critiques this approach by showing Dee's detachment from the tangible realities of her family's history. Maggie, on the other hand, embodies a direct, unmediated connection to the past. Her lived experience, marked by the physical and emotional scars of their history, informs her understanding of what truly matters. This contrast forces readers to consider whether embracing heritage means adopting new forms or continuing the practices that have sustained a community through generations.

The Tension Between Authenticity and Appropriation

Another critical conflict within "Everyday Use" revolves around the tension between authentic connection and cultural appropriation. Dee's desire to take the quilts and display them signifies a move towards appropriation – taking something from a culture and using it for personal aesthetic or intellectual gain without a full understanding or respect for its origin and meaning. Her intention to hang them on the wall, while perhaps well-intentioned in her mind, divorces them from the hands that stitched them and the lives they warmed. Walker suggests that true authenticity lies in the continuity of use and the emotional resonance that these objects hold for those who have inherited them through direct experience. The quilts are not merely fabric; they are woven with stories, resilience, and love, a sentiment that Dee seems to have lost in her pursuit of a more abstract cultural identity.

Character Analysis: Mama, Dee, and Maggie

"Everyday Use by Alice Walker" is driven by its richly drawn characters, each representing a distinct perspective on heritage and identity. Mama, the narrator, serves as the moral compass of the story. Her grounded, practical nature and deep love for her family, particularly her scarred daughter Maggie, shape her eventual decision. Dee, now Wangero, is presented as educated, worldly, and eager to distance herself from the perceived limitations of her upbringing. Maggie, though physically and emotionally marked by past trauma, embodies a quiet strength and a deep, intuitive understanding of her heritage.

Mama: The Pragmatic Keeper of Tradition

Mama is the narrator and central consciousness of "Everyday Use." She is a woman of the land, physically strong and deeply rooted in the rural South. Her life has been one of hard work and resilience, raising her daughters in difficult circumstances. While she recognizes the importance of her heritage, her appreciation is practical and deeply personal. She sees the value of the quilts not as museum pieces but as functional items that represent generations of hard work, creativity, and love. Her eventual refusal to let Dee take the quilts is a powerful assertion of her own understanding of heritage, prioritizing lived experience and continuity over sentimental display. Her love for Maggie, whom she sees as the true inheritor of their family's legacy, is evident throughout the narrative.

Dee (Wangero): The Reclaimed Cultural Enthusiast

Dee's transformation into Wangero signifies a deliberate attempt to reclaim a cultural identity that she feels was suppressed. Her education has exposed her to broader African heritage and the Black Power movement, leading her to reject her given name, which she associates with the oppressors. She returns with a new aesthetic and a pronounced desire

to connect with her African roots, but her approach is arguably superficial and intellectual. She admires the quilts as "priceless heirlooms" and "works of art," intending to hang them as decorative pieces. This desire to possess and display, rather than use and cherish, highlights her disconnect from the lived reality of the women who made them. Her arrogance and condescension towards Maggie and Mama underscore her altered perception of herself and her heritage.

Maggie: The Quiet Embodiment of Living Heritage

Maggie is the more passive and introverted of the two sisters, bearing the visible scars of a house fire that claimed her father and elder sister. Her quiet demeanor and reserved nature are often mistaken for simple-mindedness. However, Maggie possesses a profound, unspoken connection to her family's history and the traditions passed down through generations. She understands the quilts intimately, knowing the story behind each patch and the hands that stitched them. Her quiet reverence for these objects and her willingness to continue their legacy through everyday use represent the true spirit of heritage that Mama cherishes. Maggie's silent dignity and her capacity to feel the history within the quilts make her the rightful inheritor of their meaning.

The Symbolism of Key Objects in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker masterfully employs symbolism in "Everyday Use" to convey the story's central themes. The objects within Mama's home are not mere furnishings but repositories of history, memory, and cultural significance. The most prominent symbols are the quilts, but other items also contribute to the story's rich tapestry of meaning, reflecting the complexities of African American life and the enduring power of ancestry.

The Quilts: Woven Narratives of Resilience

The quilts are the most potent symbols in the story, representing the tangible link to the past and the continuity of tradition. They are not simply blankets; they are intricate pieces of art, each stitch a testament to the skill, patience, and resilience of the women who created them. Mama explains that the pieces of fabric come from various scraps, including scraps from her and Maggie's old dresses and even the drapes from her uncle's church. This imbues the quilts with a deep personal history. Dee sees them as artifacts to be admired from afar, wanting to frame and hang them. Maggie, conversely, understands their purpose: to be used, to provide warmth, and to continue the legacy of those who made them. Mama's decision to give the quilts to Maggie is a powerful endorsement of this active, lived connection to heritage.

Other Symbolic Items and Their Significance

Beyond the quilts, other objects in Mama's home carry symbolic weight. The churn top, for example, is described as something Dee wants to use as a centerpiece. This again highlights her desire to separate objects from their functional history and repurpose them for aesthetic display. The iron and dasher, though not explicitly elaborated upon, represent the tools of domestic labor and self-sufficiency that were crucial for survival and the maintenance of family life. The very setting of the house, described as simple and unadorned, contrasts with Dee's new, more sophisticated tastes. This juxtaposition underscores the fundamental differences in their perceptions of value and legacy. Even the way Mama describes her own body – "a big, bone-knobbed, muscular woman" – can be seen as symbolic of the physical strength and endurance that have characterized generations of Black women.

Major Themes Explored in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a story rich with thematic depth, exploring profound questions about identity, heritage, and the African American experience. The narrative's power lies in its ability to present complex ideas through the relatable interactions of a mother and her daughters, making the exploration of these themes accessible and impactful.

The Nature of Heritage and Cultural Preservation

The central theme revolves around what constitutes true heritage and how it should be preserved. Walker challenges the notion that heritage is something static, to be displayed in museums or admired from a distance. Instead, she argues for a heritage that is lived, continuous, and integrated into daily life. Dee's approach, focused on symbolic artifacts and an abstract connection to Africa, is contrasted with Maggie's grounded understanding, which honors the labor, love, and continuity of tradition. Mama's role is crucial in discerning which approach truly honors the legacy of her ancestors.

Identity Formation and the African American Experience

"Everyday Use" deeply engages with the complexities of identity formation within the African American context. Dee's transformation reflects the search for a reclaimed identity, separate from the legacy of slavery and oppression. Her adoption of an African name and her interest in African culture are attempts to connect with a broader, more authentic sense of self. However, Walker suggests that true identity is not solely about external symbols but also about internal understanding and connection to one's immediate

history and community. Maggie's identity, though less outwardly expressed, is deeply rooted in her lived experience and her connection to her family's past, representing a more integrated and authentic self.

The Significance of Oral Tradition and Lived Experience

The story highlights the importance of oral tradition and lived experience in passing down cultural knowledge. Mama's narrative voice is filled with the stories of her family, the history embedded in everyday objects, and the lessons learned from a life of hardship. This oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation, is what truly connects Maggie to her heritage. Dee, on the other hand, seems to have distanced herself from this lived experience, opting for a more academic or intellectual engagement with her ancestry. Walker implies that the deep understanding and appreciation of heritage come from immersion and participation, not from detached observation.

The Contrast Between Materialism and Spiritual Connection

A subtle yet significant theme is the contrast between materialism and spiritual connection. Dee's desire to possess the quilts as valuable artifacts aligns with a materialistic view of heritage, where objects are valued for their monetary or aesthetic worth. Mama and Maggie, however, represent a more spiritual connection to their past, where the value of the quilts lies in the memories, love, and continuity they represent. This distinction encourages readers to consider what truly enriches life and connects us to something larger than ourselves.

The Enduring Legacy and Relevance of "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" continues to be a cornerstone of American literature, its themes resonating powerfully with new generations of readers. The story's exploration of heritage, identity, and cultural ownership remains incredibly relevant in a world where conversations about appropriation and cultural authenticity are ongoing. Its subtle yet impactful critique of superficial engagement with culture serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of understanding and respecting the lived experiences that shape traditions.

"Everyday Use" in Educational Curricula

The story is a staple in English and African American literature courses across the United

States. Its rich symbolism, complex characters, and thought-provoking themes make it an ideal text for critical analysis and discussion. Educators often use "Everyday Use" to introduce students to important concepts in literary study, such as point of view, symbolism, characterization, and thematic development. The story provides a fertile ground for exploring the nuances of African American history and culture, encouraging students to think critically about their own relationship with heritage and tradition.

Contemporary Interpretations and Adaptations

The enduring appeal of "Everyday Use" is further evidenced by its continued adaptation and interpretation in various media. While a direct film adaptation hasn't captured the full nuance, the story's themes have influenced countless other narratives. Its core message about valuing authentic connection over superficial display continues to be a relevant lens through which to view contemporary cultural phenomena, from fashion trends to artistic movements. The story's exploration of reclaiming identity also finds echoes in modern discussions about heritage and belonging.

Conclusion: Embracing Heritage Through "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" masterfully illustrates that true appreciation for heritage lies not in detached admiration or commodification, but in a deep, lived connection that honors continuity and purpose. Through the contrasting characters of Dee and Maggie, and the discerning perspective of Mama, the story champions the active, embodied understanding of one's ancestral legacy. The quilts, more than just fabric, become potent symbols of resilience, skill, and love passed down through generations, meant to be used and cherished in the ongoing rhythm of life. "Everyday Use by Alice Walker" encourages readers to consider how they engage with their own heritage, emphasizing that the most profound connections are often forged through continued use and heartfelt understanding, rather than mere possession or display.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The central theme of 'Everyday Use' is the difference between heritage as a lived experience and heritage as an aestheticized object. It explores how individuals connect with their family history and cultural identity through tangible objects and lived traditions versus a more detached, intellectual appreciation.

Who are the main characters in 'Everyday Use' and what do they represent?

The main characters are Mama (narrator), Dee (later named Wangero), and Maggie. Mama and Maggie represent a grounded, practical connection to their past and family traditions, while Dee represents a more superficial, intellectualized, and performative embrace of Black heritage, detached from its actual lived experience.

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

The quilts are the central symbol of contention. For Mama and Maggie, they are functional objects imbued with memories of their ancestors who made them and used them. For Dee/Wangero, they are aesthetic artifacts to be displayed and admired, disconnected from their practical history.

How does Dee's transformation into Wangero reflect the story's themes?

Dee's renaming to Wangero symbolizes her rejection of her African heritage as she perceives it, adopting a new identity that she believes is more 'authentic.' This act highlights her superficial engagement with Black culture, as she embraces an externalized version while discarding the living history embodied by her family.

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

The title emphasizes the contrast between the practical, everyday use of heirlooms and traditions versus their potential for commodification or aesthetic display. The story suggests that true appreciation of heritage lies in its continued, lived use, not in its preservation as a static artifact.

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

Mama's decision to let Maggie have the quilts reveals her growing understanding and assertion of her own values. She recognizes that Maggie, despite her shyness, has a deeper, more genuine connection to their heritage and that Dee's appreciation is not rooted in shared lived experience.

How does Alice Walker use dialect and descriptive language in 'Everyday Use'?

Walker uses authentic Southern Black dialect to create a sense of place and character authenticity. Her descriptive language, particularly in detailing the physical presence and aging of the quilts and the home, evokes a sense of history and lived reality, contrasting with Dee's abstract notions.

What commentary does the story offer on the Black Arts Movement or Black consciousness?

The story can be seen as a nuanced commentary on the Black Arts Movement. While it celebrates the reclamation of Black identity and heritage, it also critiques the potential for this reclamation to become detached or performative, emphasizing the importance of grounding in lived experience and community.

What is the underlying tension between Maggie and Dee?

The tension stems from their differing approaches to their past and identity. Maggie is a quiet observer who internalizes her history, while Dee is outwardly expressive and eager to present a certain image of herself. Dee has always felt superior to Maggie, and this continues in their differing views of heritage.

How does 'Everyday Use' challenge common notions of what constitutes valuable heritage?

'Everyday Use' challenges the idea that heritage is solely found in grand pronouncements or preserved artifacts. It argues that true heritage is woven into the fabric of daily life, expressed through practical skills, shared memories, and the continuity of traditions, even in seemingly simple objects.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," with short descriptions:

1. The Color Purple: This seminal novel by Alice Walker tells the story of Celie, an African American woman in the early to mid-20th century South, who overcomes abuse and finds her voice. Through a series of letters, we witness her spiritual and emotional growth as she navigates societal constraints and personal relationships. Like the quilts in "Everyday Use," Celie's journey emphasizes the importance of heritage, resilience, and finding beauty in the ordinary.
2. Meridian: This novel follows the life of Meridian Hill, a young woman deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Georgia. The narrative explores themes of commitment, disillusionment, and the search for identity within a community struggling for justice. Meridian's dedication to her people and her understanding of their history resonate with the deep-seated connection to heritage explored in "Everyday Use."
3. Possessing the Secret of Joy: This powerful novel delves into the traumatic practice of female genital mutilation and its lasting psychological and cultural impact. Tashi, a character previously introduced in Walker's work, confronts her past and seeks healing. The book, much like the story of Mama and Dee in "Everyday Use," grapples with the complex legacies of tradition and the struggle for individual liberation.

4. The Temple of My Familiar: This novel weaves together the stories of several characters, exploring themes of love, race, history, and environmentalism. It delves into the interconnectedness of past and present, and the search for meaning in the face of oppression. The characters' journeys toward understanding their ancestral roots and cultural identity mirror the central conflict in "Everyday Use."
5. In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women: This collection of short stories offers poignant portraits of Black women navigating love, family, and societal challenges in America. Each story highlights the strength, resilience, and emotional depth of its female protagonists. The intimate portrayals of these women's lives and their connections to their past and culture echo the sentiments in "Everyday Use."
6. Anything We Want Can Be Realized: Conversations Between Alice Walker and Kristin Mann: This collection of interviews and conversations provides deep insights into Alice Walker's life, work, and philosophy. It explores her motivations for writing, her thoughts on activism, and her evolving understanding of heritage. The discussions offer a valuable context for appreciating the thematic concerns of "Everyday Use."
7. A Burst of Light: Essays: This collection of essays showcases Alice Walker's reflections on personal experiences, activism, and the complexities of life. Her writing is marked by introspection and a profound connection to the natural world and her ancestral past. The essays often touch upon the themes of preservation, cultural identity, and the meaning of legacy.
8. By the Way, Warriors: While not a direct exploration of "Everyday Use," this early collection of short stories by Alice Walker features characters and settings that foreshadow her later explorations of Black Southern life and culture. The stories often highlight the resilience of individuals and communities facing adversity. These early works lay the groundwork for her nuanced examination of heritage and identity.
9. To Hell with Dying: This children's book, though seemingly simple, carries profound themes of family, love, and the enduring power of storytelling. It depicts a loving family and their connection to their history, even in the face of mortality. The book's focus on cherished traditions and the passing down of memories aligns with the core message of valuing one's heritage as presented in "Everyday Use."

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