

# everyday use short story by alice walker 1

The enduring power and profound impact of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" continue to resonate with readers and scholars alike. This seminal short story, a cornerstone of American literature, delves into the complexities of heritage, identity, and the divergent ways in which people connect with their past. Through the contrasting perspectives of Mama, Dee (later Wangero), and Maggie, Walker masterfully explores what it truly means to honor one's ancestry. This article will provide an in-depth analysis of "Everyday Use," examining its central themes, memorable characters, symbolic elements, and lasting significance in understanding the African American experience. Prepare to explore the nuances of this powerful narrative and its relevance to our understanding of heritage today.

- Introduction to Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"
- Understanding the Central Conflict in "Everyday Use"
- Character Analysis of Mama, Dee, and Maggie in "Everyday Use"
  - Mama: The Grounded Matriarch
  - Dee (Wangero): The Evolving Daughter
  - Maggie: The Resilient Survivor
- Key Symbols and Their Meanings in "Everyday Use"
  - The Quilts: Tangible Legacies
  - The Dasher: A Symbol of Hardship and Ingenuity
  - The Setting: The Rural Southern Home
- Exploring the Themes of Heritage and Identity in "Everyday Use"
  - Authenticity vs. Commodification of Heritage
  - The Personal vs. the Intellectual Connection to the Past
  - The Role of Education in Shaping Identity
- The Literary Style and Narrative Voice of Alice Walker in "Everyday Use"

- Critical Reception and Lasting Impact of "Everyday Use"
- Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of "Everyday Use"

## Introduction to Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," first published in 1973, remains a touchstone in American literary discussions, particularly concerning heritage and identity within the African American community. The story, narrated by Mama, a pragmatic and resilient woman living in rural Georgia, centers on the return of her elder daughter, Dee, who has adopted a new name, Wangero, and a new, educated perspective on her African roots. This visit triggers a profound conflict between Dee and her mother and younger sister, Maggie, over the ownership and meaning of their family heirlooms. The narrative masterfully unpacks the differing interpretations of heritage, contrasting Dee's desire to display and romanticize the past with Mama and Maggie's more practical, lived connection to their history.

Walker's prose is rich with sensory detail, capturing the essence of the characters' lives and the environment they inhabit. The story is not merely a tale of sibling rivalry or a disagreement over possessions; it is a deeply philosophical exploration of what it means to be connected to one's ancestry in a meaningful and authentic way. Through the contrasting viewpoints of its central figures, "Everyday Use" prompts readers to consider the true nature of heritage and how it is preserved, understood, and lived. This examination will delve into the intricate layers of Walker's narrative, offering a comprehensive look at why "Everyday Use" continues to be such a significant and thought-provoking work.

## Understanding the Central Conflict in "Everyday Use"

The core of "Everyday Use" lies in the palpable tension that arises when Dee, now Wangero, returns home. Her transformation, marked by her new name and a more academic, detached approach to her heritage, immediately clashes with the lived reality of her mother and sister. The conflict escalates when Dee discovers that the family intends to give the handmade quilts to Maggie, who is engaged to be married. Dee, however, views these quilts not as functional items but as precious artifacts, demanding that they be preserved and displayed as art pieces, a stark contrast to Maggie's intended use of them.

This disagreement over the quilts symbolizes a larger debate about cultural ownership and authenticity. Dee sees her heritage as something to be collected, studied, and presented to the world, reflecting an external validation of her identity. Mama and Maggie, on the other hand, embody a heritage that is woven into the fabric of their daily lives, expressed through utility, love, and continuity. The story effectively highlights how different individuals, shaped by varying experiences and educational backgrounds, can perceive and interact with their history in fundamentally different ways. The ensuing dialogue, or lack thereof, between Dee and her family reveals the gulf in their understanding of what it truly means to honor and carry forward a legacy.

# Character Analysis of Mama, Dee, and Maggie in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker skillfully crafts three distinct female characters in "Everyday Use," each representing a different facet of the African American experience and relationship with heritage. Their interactions and internal conflicts drive the narrative and illuminate the story's central themes.

## Mama: The Grounded Matriarch

Mama, the narrator, is the anchor of the story, embodying practicality, resilience, and a deep, unassuming connection to her family's past. She is a woman of physical labor, her hands accustomed to the toil of the farm and the making of a home. Her understanding of heritage is rooted in the everyday acts of living, in the continuation of traditions through use and love, rather than through academic study or display. Mama is aware of the hardships her family has endured, and she values the skills and stories passed down through generations, particularly those that have sustained them.

Despite her limited formal education, Mama possesses a profound wisdom that allows her to discern the superficial from the genuine. Her final decision regarding the quilts is a testament to her understanding of true legacy. She recognizes that the true spirit of her ancestors is not contained within inanimate objects to be admired from afar, but in the very act of creation and the purpose for which these items were made. Her quiet strength and grounded perspective offer a powerful counterpoint to Dee's more performative embrace of her heritage.

## Dee (Wangero): The Evolving Daughter

Dee, later Wangero, represents a different trajectory, one influenced by education and a re-examination of her African identity. Having left home for college, she returns with an altered perspective, adopting an African name and a more outward, assertive way of engaging with her heritage. Her interest in the family heirlooms, particularly the quilts and the dasher, stems from a desire to reclaim and elevate her African ancestry, which she feels was suppressed during her upbringing. However, her approach is characterized by a certain detachment and an eagerness to present her heritage as exotic and valuable, even to the point of commodification.

Dee's transformation highlights the complexities of identity formation for African Americans in the post-civil rights era, grappling with the rediscovery of African roots. While her intentions may be to honor her past, her methods suggest a superficial understanding. She desires to possess and showcase relics rather than to live by the values and traditions they represent. Her pronouncements about "preserving" the quilts for their historical significance, while seemingly respectful, are perceived by Mama and Maggie as a denial of their practical, familial value. The name change itself, from Dee to Wangero, signifies a deliberate break from her perceived history and a more conscious, perhaps even imposed, connection to her African lineage.

## Maggie: The Resilient Survivor

Maggie, the younger sister, is characterized by her shyness, her physical scars from a house fire, and her deep-seated connection to her family's past, mirroring Mama's sensibility. Unlike Dee,

Maggie has remained close to home and has absorbed the traditions and stories through her lived experience. She is the quiet observer, often overshadowed by her more assertive sister, but her understanding of heritage is intuitive and deeply felt. The burns she sustained in the fire, which left her physically and emotionally marked, also seem to have instilled in her a profound appreciation for the survival and resilience of her family.

Maggie's desire for the quilts is not born of a need for display or intellectual appreciation, but from a longing to continue the legacy of her grandmother who made them. She understands the warmth, the stories stitched into their patterns, and the comfort they represent. Her acceptance of Mama's decision to give the quilts to her signifies her understanding of true inheritance. Maggie embodies the quiet, enduring strength of tradition, the lineage passed down through personal connection and love, rather than through academic dissection or exoticization. Her ability to carry on these traditions in a meaningful, everyday way is what truly honors her ancestors.

## **Key Symbols and Their Meanings in "Everyday Use"**

Alice Walker masterfully employs symbolism in "Everyday Use" to deepen the thematic resonance of the narrative. These objects serve not merely as plot devices but as potent representations of the characters' differing relationships with their heritage.

### **The Quilts: Tangible Legacies**

The quilts are the most significant symbols in "Everyday Use." Made from scraps of clothing from deceased family members—a great-grandmother's wedding dress, a grandfather's shirts—they are tangible connections to generations past. For Mama and Maggie, the quilts are functional items, meant to be used, to provide warmth and comfort, and to be passed down through use. They are imbued with the memories and labor of the women who created them. Dee, conversely, views them as artifacts, too precious to be used, to be framed and admired from a distance.

The conflict over the quilts highlights the divergence between heritage as a lived experience and heritage as a museum piece. Mama's ultimate decision to give the quilts to Maggie underscores her belief that true legacy lies in continuation and active remembrance, not in static preservation. The hands that will use them, the stories that will be told while they are spread across a bed, are what imbue them with enduring meaning.

### **The Dasher: A Symbol of Hardship and Ingenuity**

Another important heirloom mentioned is the dasher, a churn used for making butter. This object is also described as having belonged to Grandma Dee. The dasher is a tool of hard work and resourcefulness, representing the practical skills and perseverance of the ancestors. Dee, with her new interest in African culture, connects it to a butter churn in Ghana, but her association is more intellectual than experiential. Mama and Maggie understand its significance as a testament to their family's ability to sustain themselves through diligent effort and ingenuity.

The dasher, like the quilts, becomes a point of contention, symbolizing the different ways of valuing the past. It represents the physical labor and skills that formed the foundation of their family's

survival. Dee's abstract appreciation of it contrasts with the very real, tangible history of its use and the people who wielded it.

## **The Setting: The Rural Southern Home**

The rural Southern home where Mama and Maggie live is itself a symbol. It is modest, perhaps even somewhat rundown, but it is a place of stability and continuity. The setting represents the tangible reality of their lives, the land that has sustained them, and the traditions that have been nurtured within its walls. This home is the physical embodiment of their history and their connection to it.

Dee's disdain for the home, or at least her perceived need to distance herself from its humble appearance, further emphasizes her desire to transcend her immediate reality in pursuit of a more idealized, externalized heritage. The home is where the everyday acts of living, the very essence of what Mama and Maggie cherish, take place, making it a silent but powerful witness to their enduring connection to their past.

## **Exploring the Themes of Heritage and Identity in "Everyday Use"**

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a rich tapestry woven with profound explorations of heritage and identity, particularly within the context of the African American experience. The story interrogates what it means to belong to a lineage and how that connection is expressed, preserved, and understood.

### **Authenticity vs. Commodification of Heritage**

A central theme is the stark contrast between an authentic, lived heritage and its commodification. Dee, by adopting a new name, dressing in African-inspired attire, and seeking to possess family heirlooms as decorative objects, embodies the commodification of culture. She seeks to own and display symbols of her heritage, treating them as exotic curiosities rather than as integral parts of her lived history. This approach, influenced by external trends and a desire for intellectual validation, leads to a superficial engagement with her past.

In contrast, Mama and Maggie represent an authentic connection. Their heritage is not something to be collected or displayed; it is woven into the fabric of their daily lives, passed down through stories, skills, and the very use of inherited objects. The quilts, for instance, are valuable not for their artistic merit in Dee's eyes, but for the memories and labor of the women who made them and the warmth they provide. This theme challenges readers to consider whether true heritage lies in outward display or in internalized values and practices.

### **The Personal vs. the Intellectual Connection to the Past**

Walker also examines the divergence between personal and intellectual connections to ancestry. Dee's education has given her an intellectual framework for understanding her African roots, leading

her to embrace symbols of that heritage with a scholarly zeal. She recognizes the African origins of certain crafts and traditions, but her understanding remains largely academic and detached from the emotional and practical realities of her family's past.

Mama and Maggie, on the other hand, possess a deeply personal connection. Their understanding is intuitive, forged through shared experiences, memories, and the practical application of inherited skills. The quilts are not just historical artifacts; they are woven with the love of their grandmother and the comfort they provided. This personal connection allows them to feel the presence of their ancestors in a way that Dee's intellectual pursuits do not seem to achieve. The story suggests that while intellectual understanding can be valuable, it is the personal, lived experience that fosters a more profound and enduring connection.

## **The Role of Education in Shaping Identity**

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' identities and their understanding of heritage. Dee's formal education has exposed her to a broader world and a different perspective on her identity, leading her to seek a more pronounced connection to her African heritage. While this education has broadened her horizons, it has also, in a way, distanced her from the immediate realities of her family and their specific history.

The story doesn't condemn education outright but rather explores its potential to create a disconnect when it's not grounded in personal experience. Mama and Maggie, while less formally educated, possess a different kind of knowledge—the wisdom of lived experience, tradition, and practical skill. The narrative prompts reflection on how education can enrich or alter one's perception of identity and heritage, and whether it can sometimes lead to a detachment from the very roots it seeks to explore.

## **The Literary Style and Narrative Voice of Alice Walker in "Everyday Use"**

Alice Walker's literary prowess is on full display in "Everyday Use," particularly through her distinctive narrative voice and evocative style. The story is narrated from the first-person perspective of Mama, a choice that imbues the narrative with a sense of authenticity, intimacy, and grounded wisdom. Mama's voice is characterized by its simplicity, directness, and a subtle, often understated, humor. Her observations are sharp, even when she struggles to articulate her feelings or fully grasp Dee's motivations.

Walker's prose is rich with sensory details, painting vivid pictures of the rural Southern landscape and the humble interior of the family home. The smells of the kitchen, the feel of the worn fabric of the quilts, and the visual descriptions of the characters all contribute to the story's immersive quality. This detailed portrayal of their environment and daily life underscores the importance of tangible experience and the grounded nature of Mama and Maggie's connection to their heritage.

The dialogue in the story is also skillfully crafted, capturing the distinct speech patterns and personalities of the characters. The contrast between Mama's vernacular and Dee's more formal, intellectualized way of speaking further highlights the generational and experiential differences

between them. This masterful use of language and voice allows Walker to explore complex themes with a relatable and deeply human touch, making "Everyday Use" a compelling and enduring work of literature.

## **Critical Reception and Lasting Impact of "Everyday Use"**

"Everyday Use" has garnered significant critical acclaim since its publication and remains a staple in literary studies, particularly in courses on African American literature, women's studies, and American cultural history. Critics have lauded Walker's nuanced portrayal of complex themes, her memorable characters, and her powerful exploration of heritage and identity. The story is frequently analyzed for its insightful commentary on the Black Arts Movement, the rediscovery of African roots, and the challenges of cultural assimilation and identity formation.

The enduring impact of "Everyday Use" lies in its ability to spark dialogue and encourage introspection. It has become a touchstone for discussions about cultural authenticity, the meaning of family heirlooms, and the varied ways in which people connect with their past. The story's relevance continues to grow as discussions about heritage, cultural appropriation, and the importance of diverse perspectives become increasingly prominent in contemporary society. Its nuanced approach to these issues ensures that it remains a vital and thought-provoking piece of literature, resonating with new generations of readers and scholars alike.

## **Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of "Everyday Use"**

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" stands as a profound and enduring testament to the complexities of heritage, identity, and the deep-seated connections that bind us to our ancestors. Through the contrasting perspectives of Mama, Dee (Wangero), and Maggie, the story eloquently explores what it truly means to honor one's past – whether through lived experience and practical continuity or through intellectual appreciation and symbolic preservation. The quilts, the dasher, and the very setting of their rural home all serve as powerful symbols that illuminate these divergent paths.

The narrative masterfully questions notions of authenticity and commodification, prompting readers to consider the true value of cultural inheritance. It highlights the vital importance of personal connection and the wisdom derived from lived experience, suggesting that the most profound legacies are often those that are actively lived and passed down through love and continuity. The lasting impact of "Everyday Use" is undeniable, continuing to foster critical discussions about cultural identity and the multifaceted ways in which we engage with our history, making it a timeless and essential work in American literature.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

## **What is the central theme of Alice Walker's short story 'Everyday Use'?**

The central theme of 'Everyday Use' revolves around the conflict between superficial appreciation of heritage and a deeper, lived connection to it, as exemplified by the contrasting approaches of Dee (Wangero) and Mama/Maggie towards their ancestral belongings.

## **How does Dee's transformation reflect her changing perspective on her heritage?**

Dee's transformation into Wangero symbolizes her rejection of her past and her family's African American heritage in favor of a more commodified and performative version. She renames herself, adopts an African name, and desires to display her heritage as artifacts rather than use them practically, suggesting a superficial engagement.

## **What does the quilting represent in 'Everyday Use'?**

The quilts in 'Everyday Use' represent the tangible, lived history and the practical application of heritage. They are made from scraps of clothing worn by family members, embodying generations of hard work, love, and tradition. Mama and Maggie understand their significance as functional items to be used and cherished in the present.

## **What is the significance of Mama's final decision regarding the quilts?**

Mama's final decision to deny Dee the quilts and give them to Maggie is a pivotal moment. It signifies Mama's recognition that true heritage is not about display or intellectual understanding, but about lived experience, love, and continuity. It's an assertion of her own understanding of family legacy over her daughter's superficial appropriation.

## **How does Maggie's character contrast with Dee's?**

Maggie, though outwardly shy and seemingly uneducated, possesses a deep, intuitive understanding and appreciation of her heritage. She has lived through the hardships and traditions that shaped the family history, making her connection to their belongings more authentic and meaningful than Dee's performative embrace.

## **What does the story suggest about the meaning of 'heritage'?**

'Everyday Use' suggests that heritage is not merely an aesthetic or historical curiosity to be collected or displayed, but a living, breathing connection to one's ancestors, embodied in everyday practices, shared experiences, and the practical use of inherited items that carry the weight of lived history.

# Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use," with descriptions:

1. The Color Purple by Alice Walker

This novel, also by Alice Walker, shares themes of heritage, family, and the enduring strength of Black women. It tells the story of Celie, a young woman in the American South who overcomes abuse and finds her voice through letters to God and her sister. The narrative deeply explores the complexities of identity, resilience, and the importance of reclaiming one's history, much like the characters in "Everyday Use" grapple with their ancestral legacy.

2. Beloved by Toni Morrison

Set after the Civil War, this powerful novel delves into the haunting legacy of slavery and its impact on individuals and families. It centers on Sethe, a former slave haunted by the ghost of her baby daughter. The book profoundly explores themes of memory, trauma, and the struggle to define oneself outside of oppressive systems, resonating with the idea of cherishing and understanding the past that is central to "Everyday Use."

3. Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

This classic American novel follows Janie Crawford's journey of self-discovery and independence as she navigates love, loss, and societal expectations in early 20th-century Florida. Janie's quest for her own voice and identity, and her eventual embrace of her personal truths, mirrors the subtle yet significant transformations seen in the characters of "Everyday Use." The story highlights the importance of lived experience and personal understanding of heritage.

4. The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison's debut novel explores the devastating impact of internalized racism and societal beauty standards on a young Black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola longs for blue eyes, believing they will bring her love and acceptance. This story powerfully contrasts with the celebration of Black identity and heritage found in "Everyday Use," highlighting the struggle for self-worth when external forces devalue one's own culture.

5. A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

This seminal play chronicles the Younger family's dreams and struggles as they grapple with a significant insurance payout after the patriarch's death. Each family member has different ideas about how to use the money, reflecting diverse desires for advancement and respect. The play, much like Walker's story, showcases generational differences in approaching opportunity and the weight of family history.

6. Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

This novel, told through the voice of an aging Congregationalist minister, reflects on his life, family, and faith. While set in a different context, the story's contemplative tone and exploration of legacy, memory, and passing down values from one generation to the next hold thematic similarities to "Everyday Use." The minister's reflections on his ancestors and his understanding of his place in time resonate with the story's focus on inherited meaning.

7. The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett

This novel tells the story of twin sisters who choose to live vastly different lives, one passing for white and the other remaining in their Black community. The book explores themes of identity, race, family, and the choices individuals make to define themselves. It highlights the complex ways people engage with their heritage and the consequences of those decisions, mirroring the internal conflicts

within the family in "Everyday Use."

8. Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

This epic novel traces the descendants of two half-sisters in Ghana, one married to a British slaver and the other sold into slavery. Each chapter follows a different descendant through centuries of history, exploring the lasting impact of slavery and colonialism. The narrative underscores the profound connection to ancestry and the inherited stories that shape present-day lives, echoing the core concerns of "Everyday Use."

9. Passing by Nella Larsen

This novella from the Harlem Renaissance era focuses on two light-skinned Black women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who engage in "passing" as white. The story delves into themes of racial identity, social class, and the psychological toll of societal pressures. It offers a stark contrast to the embrace of Black heritage in "Everyday Use," examining the complexities and sacrifices involved in denying one's cultural roots.

## **Everyday Use Short Story By Alice Walker 1**

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