

everyday use short story by alice walker

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

Alice Walker's seminal short story, "Everyday Use," is a poignant exploration of heritage, family, and the differing ways individuals connect with their past. Set in the rural South during the Civil Rights era, the narrative unfolds through the eyes of Mama, a woman deeply rooted in her ancestral land and traditions. The story masterfully contrasts her practicality and her daughters' divergent perspectives on what constitutes true heritage. This article delves into the profound themes of "Everyday Use," analyzing the characters, their symbolic significance, and the enduring lessons the story offers about cultural identity and the meaning of belonging. We will examine the central conflict, the evocative symbolism, and the lasting impact of Walker's powerful narrative, providing a comprehensive understanding of this literary masterpiece for anyone interested in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

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Understanding the Core Conflict in "Everyday Use"

The heart of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" lies in the palpable tension between two sisters, Dee (later Wangero) and Maggie, and their contrasting philosophies regarding their family's heritage. This conflict is ignited by the impending arrival of Dee, who has been away at college and has seemingly adopted a new identity and a superficial appreciation for her past. Mama, the narrator, is a woman of

the land, practical and deeply connected to the physical manifestations of her family's history. Maggie, her younger daughter, is shy and, like Mama, possesses an intuitive understanding of their heritage. Dee, on the other hand, views their heritage as something to be admired from a distance, an aesthetic to be collected and displayed rather than lived. The central conflict, therefore, is not merely about possessions but about the very definition and valuation of heritage itself. It's a clash between a lived, embodied history and an intellectualized, commodified one, a recurring theme in discussions of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

Dee's Transformation and Rejection of Her Past

Dee's return marks a significant turning point in the narrative. She arrives with a new name, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, and a new boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, who influences her outward expression of African heritage. This renaming is a symbolic rejection of her given name, which she associates with the history of oppression and enslavement. However, her embrace of African culture appears more performative than deeply felt. She criticizes her family's simple way of life and their perceived lack of sophistication, particularly their use of everyday items that hold profound historical and emotional significance. Her desire to take the quilts, not to use them as they were intended, but to hang them as art, highlights this disconnect. She sees them as artifacts, divorced from the hands that made them and the bodies they warmed.

Maggie's Quiet Understanding of Heritage

In stark contrast to her sister, Maggie embodies a deep, unarticulated reverence for her family's past. Despite her timid nature and the scars she bears from the house fire that claimed her father and sister, Maggie possesses an innate understanding of the true value of their heritage. She knows the stories behind the quilts, the purpose for which they were made, and the love that went into their creation. Her quiet presence and her eventual, decisive act of protecting the quilts reveal a strength and a wisdom that Dee lacks. Maggie's connection to their heritage is organic, woven into the fabric of her being rather than adopted as a fashionable accessory.

Mama's Role as Mediator and Protector

Mama, the narrator, stands as the central figure navigating this ideological divide. She is a woman of immense strength and resilience, having worked tirelessly to provide for her family. Her perspective is grounded in the practicalities of life and the tangible connections to her ancestors. While she initially struggles to comprehend Dee's transformed worldview, she ultimately acts as the protector of Maggie's rightful inheritance. Her decision to give the quilts to Maggie, rather than Dee, is a pivotal moment, signifying her understanding of what truly matters: the continuity of love and tradition through practical use and heartfelt appreciation, a core message in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker.

Character Analysis: Mama, Dee, and Maggie

The characters in "Everyday Use" are meticulously crafted, each representing a distinct facet of how individuals relate to their cultural inheritance. Alice Walker uses these characters to illustrate the complexities of identity, particularly within the African American experience. Mama, Dee, and Maggie are not simply characters; they are archetypes that resonate with readers, prompting reflection on their own connections to family history and tradition.

Mama: The Embodiment of Practical Heritage

Mama is the bedrock of the story. Her physical appearance – "a large, dark woman with rough, manlike hands" – immediately suggests a life of hard work and resilience. She is unpretentious, finding joy in the simple act of living and in the tangible reminders of her family's past. Her appreciation for heritage is not intellectual; it is visceral, rooted in the soil, the food, and the objects that have been passed down. She remembers her mother and grandmother, and her own life is a continuation of their legacy. Her internal monologue reveals a deep love for her daughters, even as she grapples with Dee's perceived distance from their shared history. Mama's voice is the authenticating force in the narrative, grounding the story in reality and in a deep understanding of what it means to be connected.

Dee (Wangero): The Intellectualized and Distanced Heir

Dee's transformation into Wangero is a significant element of her character. Her new name signifies a desire to shed the perceived burdens of her past and embrace a romanticized version of African identity. Her intellectual approach to heritage is evident in her desire to study and display the family heirlooms, particularly the quilts. She sees them as artifacts of a bygone era, objects to be preserved in a museum-like fashion, rather than items to be used and loved in the present. Her disdain for her family's "ignorance" and her adoption of a new, more performative identity highlight a common pitfall: mistaking cultural appropriation for genuine connection. She represents a segment of the community who, in their quest for identity, may overlook the everyday people and practices that sustain culture.

Maggie: The Inheritor of Lived Experience

Maggie is the quiet, often overlooked daughter. Scarred both physically and emotionally by the house fire that killed her father and older sister, she is shy and withdrawn. However, her passivity belies a deep reservoir of understanding and appreciation for her heritage. She is the one who knows the stories behind the churn and the butter mold, the very items Dee wishes to display. Her connection to the quilts is not intellectual; it is emotional and tactile. She understands that the quilts are more than just fabric; they are a repository of love, memory, and resilience. Her quiet strength and her eventual, albeit subtle, assertion of her right to the quilts mark her as the true inheritor of their family's legacy. Maggie's quiet strength is a powerful counterpoint to Dee's flamboyant pronouncements.

The Significance of the Quilts in "Everyday Use"

The quilts in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" are far more than just handmade blankets; they are potent symbols that encapsulate the story's central themes of heritage, identity, and the divergent ways people connect with their past. The intricate patterns, the scraps of fabric, and the very act of their creation carry layers of meaning that are debated and understood differently by the characters, making them a focal point of the narrative's conflict. Examining the quilts offers a profound insight into Walker's exploration of cultural inheritance.

Symbolism of the Handmade Quilts

The quilts are a tangible representation of generations of women's labor, love, and storytelling. Each piece of fabric has a history, a memory attached to it. Mama describes how her grandmother made quilts, and how her mother continued the tradition. The quilts are not merely functional objects; they are living testaments to the perseverance and creativity of the women in their family. The "Double Wedding Ring" pattern and the "Tree of Life" pattern, mentioned by Mama, are not just aesthetic choices but are imbued with cultural and personal significance. They are heirlooms that embody the continuity of family and the survival of traditions through hardship.

Dee's Desire vs. Maggie's Understanding of the Quilts

Dee's desire to take the quilts and hang them on the wall represents her commodification of heritage. She sees them as decorative art pieces, detached from their original purpose and the women who made them. She says, "These are Granny's art. I want to preserve them." This is in direct contrast to Maggie's understanding. Maggie knows that the quilts were meant to be used, to provide warmth and comfort. She knows that using them is the truest way to honor the women who made them. When Dee tries to take the quilts, and Mama intervenes, it is a victory for a more grounded, lived appreciation of heritage. The story shows that heritage is not just about preservation; it's also about continuation and active engagement.

The Quilts as a Metaphor for Cultural Identity

Ultimately, the quilts serve as a powerful metaphor for African American cultural identity. They are a blend of resilience, creativity, and adaptation, pieced together from diverse experiences and traditions. Dee's desire to abstract them into museum pieces reflects a detachment from the lived reality of that culture, while Maggie's willingness to use them embodies an embrace of its ongoing, dynamic nature. The quilts are proof that heritage is not static; it is something that is lived, used, and passed down through generations in a way that maintains its spirit and purpose.

Symbolism Beyond the Quilts: Objects and Setting

While the quilts are the most prominent symbols in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," the story is rich with other symbolic elements that contribute to its deeper meaning. These include everyday objects, the physical setting, and even the characters' names, all of which work in concert to explore themes of heritage, identity, and the disconnect between superficial adoption and genuine connection.

The Churn and Butter Mold

The churn and butter mold are significant everyday objects that underscore the difference between Dee's superficial engagement and Maggie's embodied understanding of their past. These are tools that were used in the daily life of the family, vital for survival and sustenance. Dee wants to have them as decorative items, displaying them in her home as relics. Mama, however, explains that they are meant to be used. This highlights the idea that true heritage is not just about admiring artifacts but about continuing the practices and skills that shaped the lives of ancestors. The story emphasizes that the utilitarian aspect of these objects holds as much, if not more, historical value than their aesthetic appeal.

The Setting: The Rural South

The rural Southern setting of "Everyday Use" is crucial to understanding the characters' connection to their heritage. The story is set in a modest home, a place that reflects a life of hard work and resilience. The land itself is an integral part of the family's history, the source of their sustenance and the backdrop against which their lives have unfolded. Mama's connection to this setting is palpable; she is a woman of the earth, her identity tied to the soil. Dee's detachment from this setting, and her preference for a more urban, intellectualized existence, further emphasizes her distance from the lived reality of her heritage. The simple, unpretentious home contrasts sharply with the sophisticated, perhaps artificial, environment Dee seeks to inhabit.

The Names: Dee vs. Wangero

The change of name from Dee to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo is a powerful symbolic act by Dee. She claims it is a return to her African roots and a rejection of a name given by oppressors. However, Mama points out that "Dee" is a perfectly good African name, derived from her great-grandmother's name. This subtle correction by Mama suggests that Dee's renaming is an act of self-consciousness and a rejection of her actual lineage rather than a true reclamation. The name "Wangero" represents an external influence, a borrowed identity, whereas "Dee" is a name inherited and lived. This naming convention underscores the story's critique of superficial cultural adoption versus genuine, inherited identity.

Exploring Themes of Heritage and Identity

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a masterclass in exploring the intricate relationship between heritage and identity. The story delves into how individuals construct their sense of self, often in relation to their cultural and familial past. It questions what truly constitutes heritage and who has the right to define it, presenting contrasting viewpoints that resonate deeply with readers.

Defining Heritage: Lived Experience vs. Intellectual Appreciation

A central theme is the dichotomy between a heritage that is lived and a heritage that is intellectually appreciated. Mama and Maggie embody the former, their identities deeply interwoven with the daily practices, stories, and objects passed down through generations. Their heritage is an organic part of their lives, something they experience and contribute to. Dee, on the other hand, represents an intellectualized appreciation. She sees heritage as something to be studied, preserved, and displayed, detached from the everyday realities of its creation and use. This distinction raises critical questions about authenticity and the potential for cultural appropriation when heritage is viewed as a commodity or an aesthetic rather than a living tradition.

The Role of Education and Cultural Awakening

The story also examines the impact of education and cultural awakening on an individual's perception of their heritage. Dee's education and exposure to a broader world seem to have ignited a desire to connect with her African roots. However, this connection becomes distorted, leading her to adopt a superficial and, at times, condescending attitude towards her family and their way of life. Her newfound awareness leads her to critique rather than celebrate the very traditions she claims to embrace. This highlights the potential for education to both illuminate and alienate, depending on how one integrates new knowledge with existing lived experiences.

Family Legacy and Intergenerational Connection

The narrative powerfully illustrates the importance of intergenerational connection in shaping family legacy. The quilts, as artifacts of collective memory, represent the unbroken chain of love and resilience passed down from Mama's grandmother, to her mother, and intended for Maggie. Dee's attempt to take the quilts signifies a disruption of this chain, a desire to control and redefine the legacy on her own terms. Mama's ultimate decision to protect Maggie's claim to the quilts is an affirmation of the importance of continuing the authentic, lived legacy, ensuring that the traditions and the love that created them are not lost to superficial interpretations.

The Evolution of "Everyday Use" and its Cultural Resonance

"Everyday Use" has captivated readers and critics since its publication, its themes and characters offering enduring insights into the African American experience and broader discussions of cultural identity. The story's enduring power lies in its nuanced portrayal of a complex family dynamic and its timeless exploration of what it means to be connected to one's past in a rapidly changing world. Alice Walker's ability to weave profound sociological and historical commentary into a deeply personal narrative has cemented its place in literary history.

Literary Context and Alice Walker's Work

Published in 1973 in her collection of short stories, "In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women," "Everyday Use" emerged during a pivotal period of Black cultural and political awakening. Alice Walker, a prominent voice in this era, consistently explored themes of Black womanhood, heritage, racism, and resilience. "Everyday Use" is a cornerstone of her oeuvre, offering a domestic, intimate perspective on these larger societal issues. The story aligns with Walker's broader feminist and civil rights activism, advocating for the authentic voices and experiences of Black women. Her other works, such as "The Color Purple," also grapple with complex family relationships and the search for identity amidst oppression.

Critical Reception and Interpretations

Since its publication, "Everyday Use" has been a subject of extensive critical analysis. Critics have lauded Walker's vivid characterizations, particularly Mama, and her masterful use of symbolism, especially the quilts. The story has been interpreted in various ways, from a critique of Black nationalism's sometimes superficial or detached aspects to an exploration of class divisions within the Black community. Some analyses focus on the post-slavery context, where individuals grappled with reclaiming and redefining their cultural identity in the face of historical erasure. The debate over what constitutes authentic heritage and who has the authority to define it remains a central point of discussion for scholars examining Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

Enduring Relevance in Contemporary Society

The themes explored in "Everyday Use" continue to resonate deeply in contemporary society. In an age of globalization and digital interconnectedness, discussions about cultural heritage, identity, and authenticity are more prevalent than ever. The story's exploration of how individuals engage with their roots, the potential for superficial adoption of cultural markers, and the importance of lived experience over performative displays of identity remain highly relevant. Whether it's about family heirlooms, traditional practices, or a deeper sense of belonging, "Everyday Use" prompts us to consider our own connections to the past and the true meaning of heritage in our lives.

Alice Walker's Vision: Connecting Past, Present, and Future

Alice Walker's vision in "Everyday Use" is not simply to present a conflict; it is to offer a profound reflection on how we, as individuals and as a community, can forge meaningful connections across time. Her narrative suggests that true understanding and appreciation of heritage come from embracing its continuity, its practicality, and its emotional resonance. It is about bridging the gap between historical artifacts and living traditions, ensuring that the past informs and enriches the present and future.

The Importance of Continuity and Adaptation

Walker emphasizes that heritage is not a static relic to be admired from afar but a dynamic force that must be lived and adapted. The quilts, created by skilled hands for warmth and comfort, represent this continuity. Maggie's embrace of their intended use, rather than Dee's desire to exhibit them, signifies a respect for the ongoing tradition. This perspective suggests that cultures evolve, and their preservation lies not in freezing them in time but in carrying their essence forward through active participation and ongoing creation. This is a key takeaway from "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker.

Authenticity in Cultural Expression

The story champions authenticity in cultural expression. Dee's adopted persona and her appropriation of African symbols are contrasted with Mama and Maggie's genuine, albeit understated, connection to their heritage. Walker seems to argue that true cultural expression arises from lived experience, from an internal understanding rather than external imitation. This is crucial for anyone seeking to connect with their cultural identity; it's about finding one's own voice and lineage, not adopting another's.

Legacy as Lived Tradition, Not Just Objects

Ultimately, Walker conveys that a family's legacy is not contained solely within inanimate objects, but within the lived traditions, the stories, the values, and the love that are passed down. The quilts are important, but their true significance lies in the hands that made them and the lives they touched. The story encourages readers to look beyond the superficial markers of heritage and to appreciate the deeper, more enduring bonds that connect us to our past. It's about the use of these traditions, the continuation of the everyday practices that define a people.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of "Everyday Use"

"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker remains a powerful and thought-provoking narrative that continues to resonate with readers for its profound exploration of heritage, identity, and the complex ways we

connect with our past. The story masterfully contrasts the differing perspectives of Mama, Dee, and Maggie, highlighting the tension between intellectual appreciation and lived experience of cultural inheritance. Through the potent symbolism of the quilts, the churn, and the very setting of the rural South, Alice Walker crafts a nuanced commentary on authenticity, tradition, and the enduring strength found in genuine intergenerational connection. The enduring legacy of "Everyday Use" lies in its ability to provoke introspection, encouraging us to question how we value and carry forward our own ancestral legacies, reminding us that true heritage is often found not in display, but in the everyday acts of love, use, and continuity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central conflict in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"?

The central conflict revolves around the differing perspectives of Mama and Dee (later Wangero) on heritage and the meaning of their family's history and heirlooms, particularly the quilts.

How does Dee's transformation symbolize a broader cultural shift in the story?

Dee's adoption of the name Wangero and her newfound interest in African heritage, while superficially positive, are portrayed as disconnected from her family's lived experience. This symbolizes a trend of embracing cultural identity in an abstract, performative way, separate from the practical, everyday ways it's maintained.

What does the story suggest about the true meaning of heritage and tradition?

Walker suggests that true heritage is not about preserving objects as museum pieces or adopting a superficial identity, but about the lived experiences, the stories passed down, and the practical ways traditions are carried forward in daily life.

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

The quilts are the focal point of the conflict. For Dee, they are artistic artifacts to be displayed. For Mama and Maggie, they represent the love, skill, and history of their female ancestors, meant to be used and passed down through practical application.

How does Maggie's character represent the continuation of tradition?

Maggie is portrayed as shy and uneducated, but she understands the true value of the quilts and her family's history. Her willingness to learn to quilt and her connection to the memories associated with the quilts make her the true inheritor of their legacy.

What is the role of the mother (Mama) in "Everyday Use"?

Mama is the narrator and the moral compass of the story. She represents the grounded, practical wisdom of her heritage, and ultimately makes a decisive choice to protect the true meaning of tradition for Maggie.

What does the ending of the story imply about the future of heritage and identity?

The ending, with Maggie sitting with Mama and contemplating the use of the quilts, suggests that genuine cultural heritage will continue to be nurtured and preserved through everyday actions and intimate family connections, rather than through outward displays of intellectual or adopted identity.

Additional Resources

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

1. The Color Purple

This seminal novel by Alice Walker explores the resilience of a Black woman in the early 20th century American South as she navigates abuse, isolation, and finds her voice. It delves deeply into themes of heritage, identity, and the importance of Black women's relationships. The story powerfully illustrates how ancestral connections and personal growth can lead to liberation and self-discovery.

2. In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women

This collection showcases Alice Walker's early short fiction, focusing on the lives and struggles of Black women. The stories often highlight themes of racial injustice, gender inequality, and the search for self-worth within oppressive systems. Readers will find narratives that resonate with the same deep emotional intelligence and cultural awareness present in "Everyday Use."

3. Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

This classic novel by Zora Neale Hurston tells the story of Janie Crawford, a Black woman in early 20th-century Florida, as she searches for independence and love. Janie's journey emphasizes self-discovery, the importance of voice, and the richness of Black folk culture. It shares a similar thematic exploration of heritage and personal identity as "Everyday Use."

4. Beloved by Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison's masterpiece confronts the brutal legacy of slavery through the story of Sethe, a former slave haunted by the ghost of her baby daughter. The novel powerfully explores memory, trauma, and the enduring strength of family bonds. Like "Everyday Use," it delves into the complexities of preserving and transmitting history and identity across generations.

5. A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

This iconic play centers on the Younger family, a Black family in Chicago, as they grapple with economic hardship, racial prejudice, and differing dreams for their future. The story highlights the importance of family legacy, personal aspirations, and cultural heritage. It mirrors the intergenerational conflicts and the value placed on family history seen in Walker's story.

6. Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

Ralph Ellison's acclaimed novel follows an unnamed Black man's journey through mid-20th century

America as he struggles with identity and invisibility in a racist society. The novel dissects the complexities of race, assimilation, and the search for authentic selfhood. Its exploration of how heritage is perceived and misunderstood by different generations echoes themes in "Everyday Use."

7. Quilts: Their History and Their Art by Arlene Zgola

This book explores the rich history and artistic significance of quilting in American culture, particularly its role in the lives of women. Quilts often serve as tangible connections to the past, carrying stories and traditions from one generation to another. It provides a deeper context for understanding the symbolic importance of the quilts in "Everyday Use."

8. The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai

Set in the Himalayas, this novel examines the fractured lives of characters dealing with cultural displacement and the lingering effects of colonialism. It delves into themes of identity, belonging, and the complex ways in which heritage is understood and sometimes rejected. The book shares a thoughtful exploration of how family history shapes present-day individuals.

9. A Map of the World by Jane Hamilton

This novel tells the story of a woman who finds unexpected connections and challenges in rural Wisconsin while caring for her young daughter and grappling with her own past. It explores themes of community, motherhood, and the subtle ways in which personal histories and inherited values shape our lives. The intimate focus on personal relationships and the weight of memory makes it thematically aligned.

Everyday Use Short Story By Alice Walker

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