
A Role Of family in Everyday Use by Alice Walker

Everyday Use by Alice Walker is a short story depicting a hard-working black mother, and her two very different daughters. To some, it is a story about a mother finally standing up to an ungrateful daughter; to others, it is a story of heritage. It can also be taken as a story of family, and the dynamics that make up this one. There are the two daughters, Dee and Maggie, whose differences are obvious, and because of that, Mama treats them differently. At the end of this tale, Mama acts very differently herself.

Often times in families, mothers and daughters do not agree. While this is not the direct problem for Mama and her daughters, there are subtle issues between Mama and Dee. Mama loves Dee very much, but Dee wanted “nice things” (257), and has more of an education than her mama. Mama, however, describes herself as “a large, big boned woman with rough, man working hands”(256), who “can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man”(256). Mama admits that she never had an education, but wanted Dee to. She worked hard to provide Dee with a college education, and when Dee comes home for a visit one day, one would think that Dee doesn't appreciate it; that Dee is simply snobby, and a taker.

The issue arises when Dee and her new beau are visiting and having lunch with Mama and Maggie. Dee begins to ask to take certain things with her when she and Hakim.a.barber depart. Everything Dee requests to take with her, she knows nothing of the heritage behind it. But Maggie does. For while Maggie is the quieter, and more shy of the two sisters, she knows her background, and her family stories; she is proud of them. In all of Dee's eagerness to leave the house she grew up in and her family behind, she never bothered to learn. Maybe it's because Dee thought she was better than her family; or maybe she just didn't care.

So when Dee asks Mama for the quilts, the quilts that, as David White said “have a special meaning to Mama. When she moves up to touch the quilts, she is reaching out to touch the people whom the quilts represent.” Mama tries to talk Dee into taking other things, for she knows that Dee doesn't really know the family story behind the quilts, nor appreciate it. Mama loves Dee, but for once, she is putting her foot down on this particular subject. As Juan R. Velazquez states:

“Dee, in other words, has moved towards other traditions that go against the traditions and heritage of her own family: she is on a quest to link herself to her African roots and has changed her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. In doing so, in attempting to recover her “ancient” roots, she has at the same time denied, or at least refused to accept, her more immediate heritage, the heritage that her mother and sister share.”

This story is full of symbolism, with the quilts being a good focal point. They mean something to Maggie and Mama, for they realize their immediate background behind them. Those quilts are practically family heirloom, and that's something that Dee just doesn't seem to understand. While Dee may be educated, becoming “cultured” and “going back to her roots”, she never bothered to learn about or appreciate her past that was right there in her home, as Maggie did. That is why, in the end, Mama stood up to Dee, and refused to let her have the quilts. Mama gave the quilts to Maggie, the daughter who didn't really get as much as Dee, and wasn't as

“educated” as Dee, but she would certainly appreciate the quilts more, and put to everyday use. It was made by the family with love, to be used by the family with love, not to just hang somewhere, as Dee planned to do with them. Also, Maggie has literally been burned before; perhaps Mama felt guilt and realized that Maggie always grew up in Dee’s shadows, and that her youngest deserved nice things, too.

A family is what makes up a home; and Dee failed to realize that. She successfully got out and “did better” for herself, but in the end, never really learned about the people behind her that in one way or another helped her get there.

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