
Cultural Issues in Everyday Use Book

The Theme of Cultural Conflict in Alice Walker's Everyday Use

Every individual has a culture and every culture has a history. Cultural heritage is the expression of how the history of a culture relates to the present. *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker presents a conflict between a post-slavery African American and her daughter, who fights to distance herself from her mother and embrace African culture. *Everyday Use* shows the opinions of two classes of people about the value and purpose of cultural heirlooms.

Walker begins the story by developing the characters. Narrating the story is the mother of the two other main characters, Dee and Maggie. The narrator, known as Mama, describes herself as a practical woman capable of everything a man is. She compares herself to a version of herself that she dreams of, where she has fair skin, a shapely figure, and is conventionally attractive. In reality, she is none of these things (Walker 2715).

The dream version of herself is based on her daughter named Dee. Dee, who calls herself "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo," has embraced her idea of African American cultural heritage. Rejecting her birth name based on the "cultural oppression" (Walker 2718) she opts to use an Africanized name. This distances her from her family, as even her mother has trouble memorizing and pronouncing it (Walker 2718).

When Dee first speaks in the story, she greets her family with an African greeting. Her significant other, known as Hakim-a-barber, greets her family with an Arab greeting. This is confusing to Mama. Hakim-a-barber's greeting is taken by Mama to be his name, and she mistakes his name for Asalamalakim until she was corrected (Walker 2718). Mama, even though she has the same heritage as Dee, struggles to comprehend the African references that her daughter and her significant other make. Even though she her generation is less removed from Africa, she has done her very best to integrate into American society. On the other hand, Dee has made attempts to embrace African culture that she has never experienced.

Dee is attracted to the homemade, shabby, or otherwise well-worn items in her mother's house. From the benches they sat on at dinner, to the butter churn, to the dasher. She announces that she wants them to display in her house. She says, "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table," and "I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher" (Walker 2719). Dee's purpose for these objects is much different than from how Mama and Maggie use them. To them, the objects are essential parts of life and are used in a utilitarian manner. While they do represent the heritage, Mama and Maggie value their memory of their family and the people who created them as opposed to Dee's valuation of the culture that led to their creation.

Dee's materialism distances her from her family. The items that she wishes to use for decoration are important to the daily life of her mother and sister. The climax of the story occurs as Dee asks Mama for a pair of home sewn quilts made by older family members. When Mama mentions that they were promised to Maggie, Dee reveals her true intentions. She says, "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (Walker 2720). This quote, which includes the title of the story highlights the difference in cultural ideals between Dee and her

family. Quilts which were sewn for the purpose of warmth are wanted as symbols of her culture to be displayed.

Dee's rejection of her birth name passed down through her family is, according to her, an attempt to free herself from the shackles of oppression. This makes her attachment to her family's handmade articles strange, as they could also be considered products of her culture's oppression. However, her concern for them is not unfounded. Both Mama and Maggie take little care to preserve the articles that they seem to value just as much as Dee. The everyday use of these things would result in them wearing out or being damaged far quicker than preserving and displaying them as decorations.

As someone who received the most education in her family, Dee has a different outlook on life. She seems to be in a better socioeconomic class than her mother, as she and her significant other own a car. To her, it is shocking that family heirlooms would be used and not preserved for future generations. These articles are meaningful to her as a memory of her family and the history of her culture.

Everyday Use presents a contrast between how Dee and her mother embrace their culture. The college-educated Dee wants family heirlooms to be preserved as reminders of the past, while her working-class mother would opt to simply use them for their original purpose. Mama and Maggie, both presented as simple people, are bothered by Dee's materialistic behavior. While Walker's writing gives preference to the opinions of Mama and Dee, it allows the reader to have insight into why Dee feels the way she does. As she has advanced herself in life, the things help preserve the memories of the past. However, her family has no need to remember the past; they are still living in it.