

everyday use literary analysis

Everyday Use is a short story by Alice Walker that explores themes of heritage, identity, and the complexities of familial relationships. Set in the rural South, the narrative revolves around a mother and her two daughters, Dee and Maggie, who embody contrasting views on culture and heritage. This analysis delves into the key elements of the story, examining the characters, themes, and symbolism that contribute to its enduring significance in American literature.

Character Analysis

Mom (Mrs. Johnson)

Mrs. Johnson, the narrator of the story, is a strong, practical woman who has endured a life of hardship. Her life is rooted in the simplicity and struggles of rural living, which shapes her perspective on heritage. She is a loving mother who deeply cares for her daughters, albeit in different ways. Her relationship with Maggie is characterized by compassion and understanding, while her relationship with Dee is strained due to their differing values. Mrs. Johnson represents the traditional view of heritage, valuing the functional aspects of cultural artifacts over their aesthetic or symbolic significance.

Dee (Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo)

Dee is the more educated and assertive daughter, who has embraced a new identity that she believes connects her to her African roots. She changes her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, rejecting her birth name as a symbol of her desire to distance herself from her family's past. Dee's character represents a modern interpretation of heritage, one that is often criticized for being superficial. Her approach to cultural artifacts, such as quilts and handmade items, is more about aesthetics and status than about their historical and emotional significance. This creates tension between her and her mother, who views these items as integral to their family's history.

Maggie

Maggie is the quieter, more reserved sister who feels overshadowed by Dee's confidence and charisma. She has suffered from burns in a house fire, which have left her physically scarred and emotionally insecure. Unlike Dee, Maggie embodies a more authentic connection to their family's heritage, as she appreciates the practical use of their heirlooms, such as the quilts. Her character highlights the theme of self-acceptance and the importance of inner strength. Despite her lack of confidence, Maggie's connection to her family's past is deeper and more genuine than Dee's.

Themes

Heritage and Identity

The central theme of "Everyday Use" revolves around the concept of heritage and how it shapes individual identity. The story raises important questions about what it means to honor one's heritage. Dee's view of heritage is largely aesthetic; she wants to display cultural artifacts as symbols of her identity but does not understand their true significance to her family. In contrast, Maggie understands and appreciates the history behind these items, recognizing their value in everyday life. This dichotomy reflects a broader societal debate about the meaning of cultural identity in a modern context.

Conflict and Resolution

The conflict between Dee and her mother serves as the narrative's driving force. Dee's insistence on taking the quilts and other family heirlooms for her own purposes represents her desire to reclaim her heritage, but it also reflects her superficial understanding of it. Mrs. Johnson's refusal to give Dee the quilts is a pivotal moment that encapsulates the struggle for power and control over cultural identity. Ultimately, the resolution comes when Mrs. Johnson asserts her authority and decides to give the quilts to Maggie, symbolizing a return to the roots of their heritage and a recognition of the true meaning of family legacy.

Education and Empowerment

The story also touches on the theme of education and empowerment, particularly as it relates to gender and race. Dee's education has afforded her a sense of empowerment that she attempts to wield over her mother and sister. However, the narrative suggests that true empowerment comes from understanding and valuing one's heritage rather than appropriating it for personal gain. Maggie, despite her lack of formal education, demonstrates a deeper wisdom and strength that ultimately allows her to connect with her family's history on a profound level.

Symbolism

The Quilts

The quilts serve as a powerful symbol of heritage and family history. Made by generations of women in the Johnson family, they represent the narratives, struggles, and love that have been woven into their fabric. For Dee, the quilts are merely decorative items to showcase her newfound identity. For Maggie and Mrs. Johnson, however, the quilts embody the lived experiences of their ancestors and the importance of remembering where they came from. The decision to give the quilts to Maggie instead of Dee is a symbolic reclaiming of their heritage and a recognition of its true value.

The House

The Johnson family's home, characterized by its worn and humble appearance, symbolizes their life experiences and struggles. It is a physical representation of their heritage, grounded in reality and the stories of their ancestors. Dee's desire to take photos of the house further highlights her

superficial understanding of heritage. She sees it as an artifact to be admired rather than a home filled with memories and love.

The Names

Names in "Everyday Use" carry significant weight, reflecting personal and cultural identity. Dee's renaming herself Wangero symbolizes her attempt to reclaim her African heritage, yet it also highlights her disconnection from her family's history. Mrs. Johnson and Maggie's names, on the other hand, are tied to their familial ties and reflect their acceptance of their heritage. The contrast between these names emphasizes the story's exploration of identity and the complexities of self-authorship in relation to cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" serves as a poignant exploration of heritage, identity, and the dynamics of family relationships. Through the contrasting characters of Dee, Maggie, and their mother, the story raises critical questions about the meaning of cultural identity in contemporary society. The symbolism of the quilts, the house, and the significance of names further enrich the narrative, making it a powerful commentary on the complexities of heritage and the importance of understanding and valuing one's roots. Walker's work remains relevant today, inviting readers to reflect on their own relationships with heritage and identity in an ever-changing world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary theme of Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'?

The primary theme of 'Everyday Use' is the conflict between different interpretations of heritage and identity, particularly among African American women.

How does the character of Dee represent a modern interpretation of heritage?

Dee represents a modern interpretation of heritage as she embraces a more commercial and aesthetic appreciation of her roots, often dismissing her family's practical traditions.

In what ways does Mama's character serve as a contrast to Dee?

Mama is grounded in practical, everyday experiences and values the functional aspects of heritage, contrasting Dee's more superficial and trendy approach to culture.

What role do the quilts play in the story?

The quilts symbolize the family's heritage and the different ways it can be valued; they represent both the practical use of cultural artifacts and the emotional connections to ancestry.

How does the setting influence the narrative of 'Everyday Use'?

The rural setting underscores the themes of tradition and practicality, reflecting the characters' lives and their connections to their heritage.

What does the title 'Everyday Use' signify in the context of the story?

The title signifies the value of cultural artifacts in daily life, suggesting that heritage should be actively engaged with and utilized, rather than merely displayed or commodified.

How does the story explore the concept of identity?

The story explores identity through the contrasting perspectives of the characters, particularly how Dee's desire to reclaim her African roots clashes with Mama and Maggie's lived experiences.

What is the significance of the character Maggie in 'Everyday Use'?

Maggie represents the quiet strength and resilience in preserving family heritage; her character highlights the importance of personal connection to cultural identity.

How does Walker use symbolism in 'Everyday Use'?

Walker uses symbolism through objects like the quilts and the house to convey themes of heritage, identity, and the differing values placed upon cultural artifacts.

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