

everyday use short story by alice walker

Everyday Use short story by Alice Walker is a profound narrative that delves into the themes of heritage, identity, and the differing perceptions of culture within a family. Published in 1973, this short story has resonated with readers for decades, particularly in its exploration of the complexities surrounding African American identity and the significance of everyday objects in the narrative of one's heritage. In this article, we will explore the key elements of the story, its characters, themes, and the broader implications of Walker's work.

Overview of "Everyday Use"

"Everyday Use" is narrated by Mama, a strong African American woman who lives in the rural South. The story unfolds when her two daughters, Dee and Maggie, visit her at home. The contrast between Dee, who has embraced a new identity and lifestyle, and Maggie, who remains connected to their heritage, serves as the crux of the narrative.

Plot Summary

The story begins with Mama reflecting on her life and the challenges she faces as a single mother raising two daughters. The arrival of Dee, who has changed her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, symbolizes a shift in her values. She arrives with her boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, flaunting her new lifestyle and expressing a desire to reclaim her African roots. In contrast, Maggie is shy, scarred from a house fire, and more attuned to the family's traditional values.

As the story progresses, Dee's request to take family heirlooms, such as handmade quilts, sparks a conflict between the sisters. Dee views these items as symbols of her heritage, while Mama and Maggie see them as practical objects meant for daily use. This divergence in perspective highlights the different ways heritage can be understood and appreciated.

Thematic Analysis

Walker's "Everyday Use" is rich in themes, primarily revolving around heritage, identity, and the complexities of familial relationships.

Heritage and Identity

The story raises essential questions about cultural identity and heritage. For Dee, heritage is something to be displayed and celebrated, while for Mama and Maggie, it is about everyday use and practical application. This theme can be summarized in the following

points:

- Dee's perspective is one of commodification; she views her heritage as a trend to be showcased.
- Mama and Maggie embody a more grounded understanding of heritage, one that is tied to daily life and tradition.
- The quilts symbolize this conflict; they are made from pieces of clothing that tell the family's story and are meant for everyday use rather than mere display.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics play a crucial role in "Everyday Use." The relationship between the three women showcases the complexities of familial love, conflict, and understanding.

- Mama's struggle to assert her authority and understanding of heritage highlights the generational divide.
- Dee's assertiveness often overshadows Maggie's quiet strength, leading to tensions within the family.
- The climax of the story reveals Mama's realization of who truly appreciates their heritage, culminating in her decision to give the quilts to Maggie.

Character Analysis

The characters in "Everyday Use" are pivotal in conveying Walker's themes. Each character represents different facets of African American identity and heritage.

Mama

Mama is a strong, hardworking woman who embodies resilience. Her practical nature contrasts sharply with Dee's flamboyance.

- She is deeply connected to her roots and her home, representing the traditional values of her heritage.
- Mama's character development is crucial as she moves from feeling inferior to standing up for Maggie's right to their heritage.

Dee/Wangero

Dee represents a modern, somewhat superficial understanding of heritage.

- Her name change signifies a rejection of her past and a desire to create a new identity.
- Dee's attitude toward her family and their heritage emphasizes the conflict between superficial appreciation and genuine connection.

Maggie

Maggie, on the other hand, represents the quiet strength of tradition.

- Her scars symbolize both her past struggles and her deep emotional connection to her family's history.
- Maggie's eventual triumph in receiving the quilts signifies the victory of authenticity over superficiality.

Symbolism in "Everyday Use"

Walker's story is rich with symbolism, which enhances its themes and character development.

The Quilts

The quilts are perhaps the most significant symbol in the story. They represent:

- The family's history and the labor of love that has gone into creating them.
- The differing perspectives on heritage; for Dee, they are artifacts, while for Mama and Maggie, they are functional items that carry emotional weight.

The House

Mama's house symbolizes:

- The struggles and resilience of the family.
- A physical representation of their history and heritage, contrasting with Dee's more aesthetic view.

Conclusion

In "Everyday Use," Alice Walker crafts a narrative that explores the intricate relationships between identity, heritage, and family. Through the contrasting characters of Mama, Dee, and Maggie, readers witness a profound commentary on what it means to honor one's roots. The story serves as a reminder that heritage is not just to be displayed but is a living part of our daily lives. Walker's work challenges us to consider how we value our past and how we choose to integrate that into our present, making "Everyday Use" a timeless reflection on the significance of cultural identity in the African American experience.

By delving into these themes, "Everyday Use" remains a powerful exploration of identity and heritage, making it an essential read for anyone interested in understanding the complexities of family dynamics and cultural appreciation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Everyday Use' by Alice Walker?

The main theme of 'Everyday Use' is the conflict between different interpretations of heritage and cultural identity, particularly through the contrasting views of the characters Dee and Mama.

Who are the main characters in 'Everyday Use'?

The main characters are Mama (the narrator), her daughter Dee (also known as Wangero), and her other daughter Maggie. Each character represents different approaches to heritage and identity.

How does Alice Walker use symbolism in 'Everyday Use'?

Walker uses various symbols, such as the quilts, which represent family heritage and the differing values of the characters, and the house, which symbolizes the family's history and struggles.

What does Dee's name change to Wangero signify in the story?

Dee's name change to Wangero signifies her desire to reconnect with her African roots and reject the name given to her by her oppressors, highlighting her search for identity and cultural authenticity.

How does the story depict the relationship between Mama and her daughters?

The relationship between Mama and her daughters is complex, marked by love, misunderstanding, and differing values. Mama feels a strong connection to Maggie, who embodies traditional values, while she struggles to understand Dee's more modern and often superficial approach to heritage.

What role does heritage play in the characters' lives in 'Everyday Use'?

Heritage plays a central role, influencing the characters' identities and values. Dee views heritage as a way to showcase her cultural pride, while Mama and Maggie see it as a lived experience tied to their family history.

How does Walker portray the concept of 'everyday use' in the story?

Walker portrays 'everyday use' as the practical and meaningful application of heritage in daily life, exemplified by Mama and Maggie's use of the quilts, which contrasts with Dee's desire to preserve them as artifacts.

What is the significance of the ending of 'Everyday Use'?

The ending is significant as it highlights Mama's assertiveness and her decision to prioritize her connection with Maggie over Dee's superficial understanding of their heritage, reinforcing the story's theme of authentic versus inauthentic appreciation of culture.

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