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Everyday Use by Alice Walker

Alice Walker is an American activist and writer who has written a number of essays, poems, stories, and novels. Everyday Use is her famous short story that appeared in her 1973 collection known as “In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women.” It is an excellent story about heritage, family, identity, race, and the mistaken power of education. The importance of traditions, basic objects, and generational names are depicted by the author.

**Identity**

The story Everyday Use is set in the early 70s, which was a time when the African Americans were involved in a struggle to fight for their identities. The term “negro” had been replaced with the word “Black.” “Black Power,” “Black Pride,” and “Black Nationalism” were prevailing. The Africans wanted to discover their roots of identity and were ready to deny the American identities given to them. This theme has been clarified by Walker through the character of Mama, who describes herself as "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands.” She says, “In the winter, I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man.” This shows that she takes pride in her being an African, and her lack of education does not prevent her from having an understanding of her actual identity (Eder 2014, 408). Another character who clarifies the theme of identity in the story is Dee, who even changes her name to depict her new African identity. Her first name is Wangero that resembles a Kikuyu that means small people in Kenya. The middle name Leewanika resembles the Zambian King in Barotseland. She might have chosen this name to give herself a royal touch as a Princess of Africa. This choice of names from several ethnic groups depicts Dee’s interest in her identity as an African-American as she says, “The magic of naming is that people often become what they are called.”

# Heritage

The relationship of heritage to daily life is explored by Walker in the short story. Mama is the character who considers heritage as an important part of everyday life that is constantly being changed and is fluid. She has no higher education, but she appreciates her immediate roots, her family, her house, and her traditions. She tries to show Dee their heritage by giving her a family name and through quilts. The way Mama has decorated her house shows her respect and love for heritage. The benches, quilts, dasher, and butter churn symbolize the heritage of African-Americans. Comprehensive details of the quilts are given that depict what the quilts represent, “In both of [the quilts] were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War.” (Eder 2014, 55) According to Dee, heritage is a dead past that is hollow and has no connection to real life. Dee is against the beliefs of her family in heritage and its importance. She rejects the aestheticized visions of her family and their living in the old customs and makes fun of them when they appreciate their history and heritage. The quilts viewed by her mother as an important part of heritage are viewed by her as a symbol of her family’s poverty. When she changes her name and adopts a different culture, she gives a reason, "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me.”

# Family

Everyday Use is a story about a family having contradictions and complexities, drama, and history. Idea of family being more important than materialistic things is explored by the author. A struggle between mother and daughter, and sister versus sister to get the family quilt is shown in the story. The importance of family is something that many people have forgotten, and Alice Walker depicts new perspectives about family through this story. Mama plays a significant role in the upbringing of her daughters and awaits Dee to return. Although Dee is a difficult child and has a complex personality, Mama loves her and tries to reform her. Dee shows rejection of her family by changing her birth name given to her by her family. She disappoints Mama by showing her beliefs and ideas about her family. Mama tries to show her the true meaning of family, but she never fully understands that, and finally, when Dee asks for the quilt and tells she wants to use it for decoration, Mama doesn't give her that.

# Works Cited

Eder, Martin. 2014. *Alice Walker's Short Story "Everyday Use".* GRIN Verlag.