Everyday Use Study Guide

Everyday Use by Alice Walker

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Introduction

"Everyday Use" was published early in Alice Walker's writing career, appearing in her collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* in 1973. The work was enthusiastically reviewed upon publication, and "Everyday Use" has since been called by some critics the best of Walker's short stories. In letting a rural black woman with little education tell a story that affirms the value of her heritage, Walker articulates what has since become, as critic Barbara Christian notes, two central themes in her writing: "the importance of the quilt in her work ... [and] the creation of African American Southern women as subjects in their own right." When Mrs. Johnson snatches her ancestors' quilts from her daughter Dee, who wants to hang them on a wall, and gives them to Maggie, Walker illuminates her life-long celebration of rural Southern black womanhood. The motif of quilting has since become central to Walker's concerns, because it suggests the strength to be found in connecting with one's roots and one's past. As with many other stories by Walker, "Everyday Use" is narrated by the unrefined voice of a rural black woman, in the author's attempt to give a voice to a traditionally disenfranchised segment of the population.

Author Biography

Walker's short story "Everyday Use" contains several important parallels to the author's own life.

Born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker grew up in an environment much like that described in the story. Her parents were both sharecroppers, her family lived in a rundown shack, and racial segregation was legally enforced, prompting the author to describe the times as America's own era of apartheid. Like Maggie Johnson, Walker was disfigured as a child. A gunshot wound left her blind in one eye; she became shy and withdrew into her own world of reading and writing. Like Dee Johnson, Walker's abilities garnered her a scholarship to Spelman College, which led her away from her poverty-stricken background to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1961. These were especially turbulent times for African Americans, and Walker soon became involved in efforts to improve conditions for blacks. In 1964, she travelled to Uganda as an exchange student. She returned to the United States for graduation, and upon receiving a writing fellowship she made plans to return to Africa. However, her job as a case worker in New York City's welfare department reconfirmed her commitment to the American black community, and she soon traveled to Mississippi to work on a voter registration drive.

Walker also continued writing, and she began to achieve national attention by publishing her first book of poetry in 1968 and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in 1970. Further novels, poetry, essays, and children's books followed, and Walker's popularity grew enormously in 1983 when her novel *The Color Purple* garnered the Pulitzer Prize, making her the first black woman writer to receive the award. Her prominence as a major voice in American literature was further solidified when Steven Spielberg made the novel into a major motion picture in 1985. Throughout her career, Walker's art has shed new light on various aspects of African American experience, particularly the trials and tribulations of black women. Her feminist standpoint has led to some criticism for her often unflattering portrayals of black men.

Plot Summary

The story begins with the narrator, a "big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" awaiting the homecoming of her daughter Dee, an educated woman who now lives in the city. Accompanying her is her younger daughter, Maggie, a shy girl who regards her sister with a "mixture of envy and awe." As they wait, the narrator reveals details of the family history, specifically the relationship between her two girls. A fire when they were children destroyed their first house and left Maggie badly scarred on her arms and legs. The mother's memory of the night the house burned defines her two daughters: Maggie "with her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little peppery flakes" and Dee "standing off under the sweet gum tree.. .[with] a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot chimney."

Since the fire the two daughters have taken diverging paths. Maggie has a little education, but according to her mother, "she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by." She is, however, engaged to marry and will soon leave her mother's house. Dee, on the other hand, has been ambitious and determined since girlhood to rise above her humble beginnings. Thanks to her mother's and the church's fundraising efforts, she has gone off to school in Augusta.

When Dee arrives, Maggie and her mother are waiting in the front yard, which serves the family as "an extended living room." She emerges from the car dressed in bright clothing and gold jewelry; her boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, has wild-looking hair. After greeting her mother and Maggie in a language they do not understand, Dee starts taking pictures, posing Maggie and her mother in front of the house as though she were a tourist. Dee tells her mother that "Dee is dead," and her new name is "Wangero Leewaruka Kemanjo." She claims she could not stand being "named after the people who oppress me." Her mother's complaints that "Dee" is an old family name do not register.

During the meal Dee reveals her true intentions in visiting: to collect objects for her home that she can use to display her heritage. First she takes the butter churn, which she plans to use "as a centerpiece for the alcove table." After dinner Dee continues to search for objects for her collection and latches on to the quilts that had been made by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. The quilts contain pieces of family history, scraps from old dresses and shirts that family members have worn One patch is constructed of the girls' great grandfather's Civil War uniform.

The quilts, however, have already been promised to Maggie for her wedding. Dee contends that she has a right to them because she understands their value as folk art, declaring them "priceless." Maggie, on the other hand, is prepared to relinquish her rights to them rather than argue with her sister. When Maggie tells her she can have the quilts, because she "can 'member Grandma Dee" without them, the mother knows instantly who is the most deserving. She hugs Maggie, who was "used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her," and "snatched the quilts out of Miss

Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap." After Dee departs without the quilts, Maggie smiles a "real smile" for the first time.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Everyday Use" begins with a mother, Ms. Johnson and her daughter, Maggie, waiting for her sister, Dee. They have obviously prepared the yard very carefully waiting for her arrival. They have perhaps raked the clay ground in preparation for comfortably sitting down in the yard together and staring up at the elm tree.

Once upon a time, there was a fire and Maggie was burned very badly. There are still scars up and down her arms and legs. Dee, her sister, fared better. It was as though she had then, as she perhaps has now, a kind of charmed life. Whereas the world turned to Maggie and always said, "No," it would never do that to Dee.

The mother has a recurring daydream. Perhaps it has been suggested by those talk shows where a successful, grown-up child sees parents he or she has not seen in many years. The parents are old and unsuccessful. The child embraces the parents, thanking them for their help, expressing gratitude.

In the mother's dream, she meets Dee on something like Johnny Carson's show. She is ushered into a blinding, bright room after having stepped out of the cozy darkness of a limousine. The sporty gray man smiles at her. Dee pins an orchid onto her dress. There is quiet celebration of their success as a mother and child.

On the show, Ms. Johnson is more beautiful, a hundred pounds lighter with perfected skin- unlike the fatter, big-boned reality, the real tough woman who kills and cleans hogs, who can work all day in icy temperatures, who can eat a pork liver minutes after she has killed the hog. She is radiant, with glistening hair on the show. And, yes, this is Johnny Carson who tries his best to keep up with her clever repartee.

This dream is far from reality. In truth, if Ms. Johnson were really talking to Johnny Carson she, like all her kind, could never keep up with him and, God help her, would be as fearful of him as of any white man. She would be ready to run away any minute. She wasn't like Dee, who was quite fearless with anyone.

They are still waiting. Maggie comes out, wondering how she looks. Maggie comes out gingerly. She is always bent over, shuffling, hiding herself- like an animal that was once run over. She had been this way since the fire. Ms. Johnson had held her during the fire, while Dee stood outside by the gum tree. Dee had always hated the house anyway. The fire was like a present. Dee always had looked nicer than Maggie.

After the fire, the church helped Ms. Johnson raise money to send Dee to school in Augusta. She tried to share her precious knowledge with her mother and sister. But most of it didn't take. She seemed to end things just before there was a glimmer of understanding.

Dee was relentless when she wanted something. And she wanted nice things, like a yellow, organdy dress for graduation, like black pumps to match a dress she made from some discards given to her mother.

The mother never went to school for any time. In fact, her whole school was closed down in second grade. Black people accepted it back then. Maggie tries to read to her sometimes but she can't see well and she isn't really good at learning. She won't have good looks or money but she will marry her boyfriend, John Thomas. Then her mother can sit home alone and sing her church songs to herself. Not that she was a singer. She was better at doing man's work. In 1949, a cow kicked her in the side when she was milking it and she lost her taste for milk.

Ms. Johnson doesn't care about the house she lives in. Dee won't like it. She'll visit but she'll never bring her friends. Some boys hung around the house in the afternoon, when they washed clothes. There were some tittering little girls here and there. The girls liked her and she read to them.

At one point, she went after Jimmy T, she kind of ignored Maggie and her mother. But, then, Jimmy T went away and got married. It kind of shocked her. Therefore, her mother was reflecting on the past, when Dee showed up. She saw her leg first, Dee's very recognizable, neat looking feet extending out first- from some man's car. He is a very hairy looking gentleman. Maggie greets them by sucking in her breath several times.

Dee is dressed blindingly. She is decked out in a dress of orange and gold, with gold earrings and resplendent sounds when she walked. Dee's hair is very black and stands on her head like a sheep's wool with two pigtails. Maggie sucks in her breath again. The man greets them in Arabic, calling them "my mother in sister." Dee gets a Polaroid out of the car. The man, a barber, tries to shake hands with Maggie, very unsuccessfully.

Dee has changed her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo to rid herself of "her oppressors." But, as her mother gives her the true lineage of her name, she gets tired. Perhaps she just likes the new name. Her mother doesn't mind and manages to hear it a few times. Far more different is the barber's actual name so they wind up just calling him Hakim.

There were some cattle folk down the road, who also greeted people with "Asalamalakim," but generally were too busy, to be friendly. At some point, their herd was poisoned and they spent the evening, wide-awake, with guns. Was Hakim Dee's husband? Her mother couldn't tell. Hakim shared some beliefs with the "cattle people," but he wanted to do other things with his life besides raise animals. He had his own trade, didn't he?

When they ate lunch, Hakim wouldn't eat collards or pork. He thought that eating pork was unclean. Dee was filled with delight at the food, particularly the sweet potatoes. This was the food she grew up with. And, for the moment, Dee/Wangaroo was an aficionado of the past. She even loved the hand-made bench her father meant, rubbing her hands over it to feel the shape of the "rump prints" that use and age had created.

Now, she was coveting different pieces of the butter churn. She wanted to use them for decoration. They gave it to her as a gift.

Now Dee went over to a trunk in her mother's bedroom and started to go through it. Grandma Dee had made it out of scraps from her old dresses, from Grandpa Jattell's shirts, even a scrap from Great Grandpa Ezra's Civil War uniform. There were others, machine-made, that could last longer. But Dee wanted the hand-stitched ones. Her mother had thought of giving them to Maggie. Dee gasped when she heard that. Still, Maggie would probably actually use them and they wouldn't use them. Dee appreciated them more, wanted them as precious relics. She had forgotten how she had rejected them before as "old-fashioned" before she went to college. Now the quilts were her need and her obsession. Maggie would destroy them. She would "hang them." She would archive them forever.

Maggie overheard the conversation. She said to give the quilts to Dee. But her mother could also tell that she felt she had lost out again. Yes, she said she didn't need the quilts to remember her Grandmother, but she also knew, deep down inside, that something was being taken away from her.

Then her mother did an uncharacteristic thing. It was as if she were touched with the Holy Spirit, some kind of current of energy running from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. It was "Halellujah" energy, the energy that led to shouting and stomping in Church. She grabbed Maggie, hugged her, dragging her into the room, snatching the quilts away from Dee/Wangaroo and dumping them into Maggie's lap.

This action greatly surprised both girls. Dee was offended and went to the car. She reprimanded them both on not appreciating their heritage. She told Maggie to make something of herself. She then put on her sunglasses. At this time, Maggie just smiled- for no clear reason. Later, they watched the car go off. Dee and her barber friend were off to another world. Maggie brought some snuff for her mother. They sat outside and enjoyed the rest of the day.

Analysis

This is a very short story heavy with history. It etches itself deeply in one's mind because of the strength and power of the characters. It is the story of Ms. Johnson and her two daughters, Maggie and Dee. It seems plotless, unless one looks at it very carefully. It is a heavily themed story, a snapshot of people living profoundly with and away from each other. But is it actually a story? Does it have a beginning, middle and an end? Does it have a climax?

The story is narrated by Ms. Johnson, a heavy-set, uneducated woman who has led a very poor and very difficult life by most people's standards. She obviously loves her daughters but looks at them very differently. This is a story of values and the title of this short story is probably the key to unlock it's meaning.

Maggie has stayed with her mother. She is a slow learner. She has been physically scarred by a fire that her sister, though present, largely escaped. She more or less stayed home while her sister went off to college. She is a very loving child, a simple person, but very real.

Dee comes home, impeccably attired- with a sort of fashion style she has cultivated. She has changed her name to Wangaroo. She is ethnic, hip and very serious about her newly built self. Despite her somewhat ethnic orientation, her boyfriend, Hakim, is an Arab and comes, perhaps, from an altogether different orientation. He is friendly and well-meaning but very rooted in his culture. He rejects the pork and collards, which Dee, glad to be home, heartily devours along with the sweet potatoes.

Dee's reality is reflected in her mother's "Johnny Carson dream," where her mother meets Dee under the bright lights of a television studio, probably hosted by Johnny Carson. There, she celebrates her mother/daughter relationship, pinning an orchard to her mother's dress. It is a kind of artificial, staged reality. Ms. Johnson points out that, in the dream, she is a hundred pounds lighter and well coffered, her hair gleaming in the lights.

Dee is like that- somewhat artificial and fashion-driven, and most importantly, in regards to the story- in her newfound interest in the family's heirlooms. First, she focuses on the butter churn, whose components she wishes to turn into ornaments. And she is given these ornaments by her mother. They are wrapped up for her.

Here is the key to the story- the "use" of these heirlooms. This is the wedge that separates these two realities: Maggie and her mother's is a harsh hog killing, snuff-sniffing, church-going, work-oriented reality where heirlooms like the butter churn were used for survival. There was a decorative aspect to the butter churn, but the reality of the churn was its practical "use."

Dee's reality is a hip, ethnic, almost museum-like conservator interest in the butter churn. Its usefulness has faded. When she sees her mother's quilt, she is eager to hang them. Alice Walker, the author says of Dee's comments, "As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts." For Dee, the practical "use" is secondary. Decorative comes first, even if it cancels out the other use altogether.

When she goes after the quilts, the old, authentic ones- it's that she's "afraid": her sister will use them and therefore she will destroy them. Yes, her sister, Maggie, wants them, but she is ready and willing to give them to Dee. The reason for this is simple- Maggie is acting out of love, out of a generosity of spirit. Dee, of course, accepts the quilts without really being given them. She sort of assumes proprietorship.

Suddenly, Ms. Johnson has a revelation. She grabs the quilts away from Dee and pulls her other daughter into the room. She gives Maggie the quilts, because Maggie understands the real family tradition, not Dee. It is not craftsmanship that drives these creations. It is their lifestyle, which, in a sense, is tailored to the moment-by-moment

struggle for survival. Maggie is much more a product and an heir to this lifestyle than Dee, who has abandoned even her name and her uneducated family's ways.

Ms. Johnson believes that Dee appreciates the work from a distance, but doesn't understand it's "use." The butter churn is for churning butter and the quilts are used for keeping warm. There is a sacred quality, a spiritual quality- to their actual, practical use.

Therefore, Ms. Johnson's chooses Maggie because Maggie understands what the quilts really are. They are not artifacts. They are beautiful things to be used- and, yes, perhaps to be used up. They have been created by a family drenched in poverty, in discrimination, in physical hardships of every kind. They have been touched with craftsmanship and by the family history (as in the origin of the various patches in the quilt) because of the artisan's cherishing of their life, their real hog-killing, butter-churning, quilt-stitching life. This is what their mother really understands. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said about words, "The meaning is the use." And, for Alice Walker's characters, this also goes for quilts.

Characters

Asalamalakim

See Hakim-a-barber

Grandma Dee

Although Grandma Dee, as the Johnson women call her, does not appear in the story, she is a significant presence. Maggie is attached to the quilts because they make her think of Grandma Dee. Thus, although the woman is dead, she represents the cherished family presence that lives on in Maggie's and her mother's connection to the past.

Hakim-a-barber

Hakim-a-barber is Dee's boyfriend who accompanies her on her visit back home. Though he has grown his hair long in an African style that identifies him with the black power movement, he refuses to eat collard greens and pork at dinner— traditional African-American foods. This minor character's name is perhaps his most significant feature. Mrs. Johnson confusedly accepts his black Muslim greeting, "Asalamalakim," as his name, and "Hakim-a-barber" is her guess at the pronunciation of what he tells her to call him. This confusion signals the gap between black nationalist ideas and rural African-American life.

Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo

See Dee Johnson

Dee Johnson

Dee is Mrs. Johnson's oldest daughter; the one who has always been determined, popular, and successful. Upon returning home after escaping her impoverished home life and forging a new identity at college, one which ostensibly celebrates her African heritage, Dee tells her mother that "Dee is dead," and her name is now Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Thus, Dee denies her real heritage, in which she was named for her aunt. Dee's other attempts to appreciate her cultural heritage miss the mark: she wants to display her mother's possessions in her home as examples of folk art but refuses to recognize their greater value to her mother and sister as objects of "everyday use" that they still use.

Maggie Johnson

Burned severely in a house fire as a child, the shy, stammering Maggie Johnson cowers in the overwhelming presence of her sister. While Dee has moved on to an entirely new life, Maggie still lives in poverty with her mother, putting "priceless" objects to "everyday use." At the end of the story, the quiet, self-conscious Maggie smiles, "a real smile, not scared," because her mother has finally recognized that she, not Dee, is the daughter who understands her heritage and the importance of connecting with one's ancestors.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson is the narrator of this story, overseeing its events and interpreting, more through her actions than her words, their significance. As she waits for her daughter Dee to return home for a visit, she demonstrates her lack of self-esteem by imagining a much thinner, prettier version of herself meeting her daughter on a television show. Near the end of the story, Mrs. Johnson demonstrates a shift in her maternal sympathies by taking the quilts from Dee and giving them to Maggie, signaling for the reader where the author's own sympathies also lie.

Themes

Heritage

The main theme in the story concerns the characters' connections to their ancestral roots. Dee Johnson believes that she is affirming her African heritage by changing her name, her mannerisms, and her appearance, even though her family has lived in the United States for several generations. Maggie and Mrs. Johnson are confused and intimidated by her new image as "Wangero." Their own connections to their heritage rest on their memories of their mothers and grandmothers; they prefer to remember them for who they were as individuals, not as members of a particular race. Because of their differing viewpoints, each values the Johnson's possessions for different reasons. Dee digs around the house for objects she can display in her own home as examples of African-American folk art. Maggie and her mother value the same objects not for their artistic value, but because they remind them of their loved ones. Dee admires a butterchurn, and when Maggie says it was carved by their aunt's first husband—"His name was Henry, but they called him Stash"—Dee responds condescendingly

Materialism

Dee's materialism is demonstrated at a young age when she watches her modest home burn with "a look of concentration on her face." Later, "Dee wanted nice things"—particularly clothes—and was interested in maintaining a style that belied her humble roots. Her mother states that when she sees the new house, a three-room shack with no "real" windows and a tin roof, "she will want to tear it down." Her appearance confirms this trend: she is dressed in elaborate clothes and gold jewelry, Dee's interest in the butterchurn and the quilts is raised because they are "priceless" objects. She wants to possess them as relics and would not think of employing them for "everyday use." In contrast to Dee's materialism is Maggie's and her mother's pride in their home and their contentedness with life. They have made the front yard "clean and wavy" in anticipation of her arrival, and the yard is "more comfortable than most people know."

Community vs. Isolation

The quilts represent the Johnsons' connection to their community. They are formed by patches of clothing from many peoples' clothes, forming a mosaic that represents the past, their loved ones' lives, and their family history. Dee's lack of interest in the people with whom Maggie associates the quilt underscores the story's emphasis on the importance of community. Furthermore, while Dee cannot wait to escape her family's poverty so she can go to college and have nice things, her mother and sister have a clean yard in which "anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree." Maggie, despite her shyness, is engaged to be married, showing her ability to connect with another person. Dee, who Maggie suggests has never had real friends, has been jilted

by a man who "flew to marry a cheap city girl." By showing the different paths the sisters have taken, Walker suggests that black nationalists such as Dee and Hakim-a-barber, who identify with their African ancestry by rejecting white ways, have cut themselves off from connecting with then-backgrounds, which often have not been steeped in African tradition. Dee's apparent embarrassment about her rural roots contrasts sharply with Maggie's heartfelt connection through the quilts to her grandmother.

Style

Point of View

"Everyday Use" is told in first-person point of view. Mrs. Johnson, an uneducated woman, tells the story herself. The reader learns what she thinks about her two daughters, and her observations reveal her astute observations about life. This technique seeks to validate the experiences of an often oppressed group of people: lower-class, black women. By putting Mrs. Johnson at center stage, Walker confirms her value and importance in society. Mrs. Johnson has mixed emotions about her daughters. She likens Maggie's demeanor to "a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car," and says that Dee's reading "burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know." These conflicting feelings show the reader the complex nature of her thoughts and her ability to size up people when necessary. Her thoughts are compounded further by her fantasy of reuniting with Dee on a television talk show where "Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue."

Symbolism

The story is not only rich in symbolism, it is also about symbolism. The quilts are the central symbol of the story, representing the connectedness of history and the intergenerational ties of the family. Other symbols include Maggie's burned skin, which can be interpreted as depicting how she has been "burned" by the circumstances of her Life. Mrs. Johnson's "man-working" hands symbolize the rough life she has hand to forge from the land on which they live. Names become symbolic in the story as well. Dee thinks her name represents "the people who oppress me," and substitutes an African name that has no relation to her family roots. When Hakim-a-barber says that he does not eat collard greens and pork—traditional African-American foods—he symbolically denies his heritage despite his complicated African name. Clothing also represents the characters. Mrs. Johnson wears utilitarian clothing: overalls and flannel nightgowns, representing her no-frills approach to life. Dee wears a "yellow organdy dress" to her graduation and other wild, colorful clothing. These outfits represent her colorful, vibrant nature as well as her unwillingness to fit in to her surroundings, a harsh land more suited to farm clothing. Maggie's character is symbolized by the dress that" [falls] off her in little black papery flakes" during the house fire: fragile and burned.

Irony

The central contradiction in this story emerges when readers understand Walker's point about Dee's efforts to appreciate her heritage. While Dee has acquired an education and understands her African past, she mistakenly looks to this history in order to affirm her heritage, forgetting her real origins and the people who raised her. She admires the

quilts, particularly because her grandmother has sewed them by hand. She is more entranced by the thought of someone sewing by hand than by the person who did the sewing.

Diction and Dialect

In relating the story in first-person, Walker gives Mrs. Johnson a pattern of speech that helps define her character. An uneducated woman, Mrs. Johnson nonetheless is able to express herself well. She waits in a yard that has been made "clean and wavy," meaning that she has taken pride in her house and fixed it up in anticipation of her daughter's arrival. Walker's subtle rendering of Mrs. Johnson's voice reveals that this older rural woman can also speak with efficient, lyrical clarity, as in her account of having "knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and [having] had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall," or in her description of Hakmi-a-bar-ber's real name, which is "twice as long and three times as hard" to pronounce. Walker artfully suggests, then, that a "good" education does not necessarily result in a "better" form of speech.

Historical Context

The Black Power Movement

Even before their emancipation from slavery, African Americans struggled to define their collective identity within the framework of American society. Even after slavery was outlawed, blacks gained the right to vote, and legal decisions dismantled formal segregation, true equality was far from reality. By the 1960s, following the success of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, some African Americans began to take pride in their heritage as a way of bolstering their esteem, forging a group identity, and creating a platform for greater political power. Known as "black pride" or Black Nationalism, these ideas encouraged many young African Americans to learn about their cultural ancestry, grow their hair into "Afros," dress in traditional African clothing, and reject their "slave names" (as Malcolm X called most blacks' given names). Many of these tendencies are exhibited by Dee and Hakim-a-barber in "Everyday Use." The Black Panthers, led by former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee president Stokely Carmichael, embodied these ideas in their "black power" slogan as they fought for civil rights and voter registration. However, by the early 1970s, many of these organizations were accused of discrimination against women in the way they were organized and run, and writers like Walker sought to portray the voice of the black woman apart from a larger political context.

The Nation of Islam

Another form of African American self-assertion that gained popularity in the early 1970s was the Nation of Islam, a religious and political organization founded in the 1930s and known popularly as the Black Muslims. This movement, which since Malcolm X's death in 1965 has been led by Louis Farrakhan, asserts that white society is not capable of being nonracist. Furthermore, instead of seeking integration, the organization encourages blacks to separate themselves into an independent community within the United States (a rejection of the back-to-Africa beliefs of earlier African American separatists). Like Dee Johnson, a.k.a. Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, Black Muslim followers usually change their names, symbolically rejecting white society by rejecting their "slave names." The Nation of Islam also espouses the home as the center of community life, with a male-led family and a helpful, supportive wife and mother.

The Black Arts Movement

The cultural extension of the Black Power movement was the Black Arts movement, a conscious effort by many artists and critics to celebrate African-American culture for its own forms, ideas, and styles, rather than seeing it as derivative of European-American culture. This movement focused on the works of black artists and writers, and on the validity of various forms of black folk art, including quilts and other items normally put to

"everyday use." Some artists, such as Alice Walker, questioned what they saw as three particular deficits of the Black Arts movement: its tendency to speak for all blacks in a subtle assumption that all blacks' experiences were the same; its conception of blackness in almost entirely masculine terms; and its implication that urban black experience is somehow more "real" than rural black experience. Walker addressed all three of these concerns in "Everyday Use," articulating most eloquently an early assertion of Black Feminism.

Black Feminism

As the women's movement gained momentum in the early 1970s, many African-American women began to consider themselves excluded from it because it appeared to advocate rights important mostly to white women. They pointed out, for instance, that when suburban housewives spoke of wanting to do more than take care of their homes, they were ignoring the experiences of African American women, most of whom already worked outside the home, as their mothers and grandmothers before them had. By the mid-1970s, many black women, including Walker, articulated a distinctly Arrican-American form of feminism that heralded the efforts of one's immediate matriarchal ancestors. Some of these concerns are addressed in "Everyday Use."

Critical Overview

When "Everyday Use" appeared in a 1973 collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, reviewers of the book recognized the uniqueness of Alice Walker's portrayals of African-American women's experiences. Jerry H. Bryant, for instance, described Walker in The Nation as a writer "probing for the hitherto undisclosed alpha and beta rays of black existence." Critics also enthused over Walker's artistic abilities, most agreeing with Barbara Smith, who wrote in Ms. magazine that "Walker's perceptions, style, and artistry ... consistently ... make her work a treasure, particularly for those of us whom her work describes." While "Everyday Use" was singled out for praise by several critics, it has since achieved great prominence within the opus of Walker's work. Several admiring articles have been written about it, and in 1994, Barbara Christian published*Everyday Use*, an entire book of essays built around this one story. As Christian wrote in the book's introduction, the story has come to be recognized as an exemplary, foundational piece for several of Walker's primary interests as a writer. She noted, for instance, that like many other works by Walker, it "placed African American women's voices at the center of the narrative, an unusual position at the time."

Telling African-American women's stones with honesty, and placing such previously unrecognized women on center stage to tell and act out their own stones, was a method Walker used to great success and acclaim in her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, Thanks in large part to Walker (who in turn gives much of the credit to Zora Neale Hurston), this narrative method, exemplified in "Everyday Use," has since become a standard technique for many black women writers, including Gloria Naylor, Tom Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Toni Cade Bambara. The story's central symbol of quilting also resonates beyond the story itself. Gathering loose bits of material into beautiful, meaningful quilts has long been a form of African-American art, but as Walker realized, this and other forms of women's art have often been overlooked by the establishment. This short, rich story also announces Walker's response to her contemporaries' wish to speak for all blacks in African-nationalist terms: a viewpoint extremely popular in the early 1970s. As a writer with black feminist insight, Walker gives voice in this story "to an entire maternal ancestry often silenced by the political rhetoric of the period," quoted Christian. Finally, this story also stands out as an example of Walker's answer to many black intellectuals who have stressed the need to leave old, rural ways behind in order to improve their economic and political standing. Walker's depiction of the quiet dignity of Maggie and Mrs. Johnson has been recognized as an appreciation for what rural Southern black folk are, not what they should become. Much of Walker's critical acclaim focuses on the integrity she imparts to her characters, no matter what their circumstances.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Piedmont-Marton is a professor of English and the coordinator of the writing center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, she discusses the quilting metaphor in "Everyday Use."

Alice Walker's early story "Everyday Use" is clustered around a central image: quilting and quilts. Her use of this metaphor is important to critics because she went on to develop the theme more fully in her later work, especially the novel *The Color Purple*. Simply put, the quilt is a metaphor for the ways in which discarded scraps and fragments may be made into a unified, even beautiful, whole.

Quilting symbolizes the process out of which the unimportant and meaningless may be transformed into the valued and useful. Walker finds this metaphor especially useful for describing African-American women's lives, which traditional history and literature have often ignored and misrepresented.

Alice Walker is not the first to turn her attention to the importance of cloth making in women's culture. Women have been associated with textiles since the days of recorded history. Although weaving and sewing has often been mandatory labor, women have historically endowed their work with special meanings and significance. In classical mythology the fates were portrayed as women, but nearly all mythologies bear traces of the Triple Goddess as the three fates, rulers of past, present, and future. One type of goddesses spin time, another group measure it and weave events together, and yet another group cut off lengths of cloth. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus's wife Penelope uses her skill at the loom to keep suitors at bay until her husband returns.

Walker herself explained the significance of quilting (and gardening) to the collective lives of women, especially those of African-American women, in an essay written the year after "Everyday Use" was first published. In the essay titled "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker asks us to consider what would have become of black women artists who lived in slavery and oppression. Would they have been "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release"? Walker explains how she discovered her mothers' gardens, by which she means her creative female ancestors. Having looked "high when she should have been looking low," Walker discovers that "the answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it." When she sees a stunning quilt of the crucifixion hanging in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, and sees that it is credited only to "anonymous Black woman in Alabama," she knows she is in the presence of "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use."

Critic Barbara Christian reads Walker's "Everyday Use" as a sort of fictional conclusion to the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Christian notes that Walker's major insight in the essay is her "illumination of the creative legacy of 'ordinary' black women of the South." Walker, according to Christian, does more than acknowledge that the

quilts these women produced can be regarded as art; she is impressed "with their functional beauty and by the process that produced them." In other words, Walker is asking us to reconsider whether quilts can be counted as art. But more than that, Christian claims, she is also suggesting that they truly artistic objects may be those that have and everyday use. In "Everyday Use," Walker dramatizes the "use and misuse of the concept of heritage" using the quilt as unifying object and metaphor, and at the same time challenges our definitions of what counts as art in our culture.

The conflict between Maggie and Dee (or, Wangero, as she prefers to be called) is about whether heritage exists in*things* or in *spirit*, or process. Dee, who "at sixteen had a style of her own: and knew what style was," has recently returned to her black roots because they are fashionable. As Maggie and her mother watch warily, she goes around the house collecting objects from her heritage that she now *sees* as valuable. When she gets to the quilts a conflict arises. Her mother recalls that Dee had been offered a quilt when she went away to college, but had then declared it "old fashioned, out of style." Now however, her experience with the larger culture, with "words, lies, other folks' habits," gives her a frame within which to take possession of her own heritage. Walker dramatizes this when Dee declares that she plans to hang, or frame, the quilts, "as though, the mother comments to herself, 'that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.'" Dee seems to think that art is always something that comes in a frame.

Dee views her heritage as an artifact which she can possess and appreciate from a distance instead of as a process in which she is always intimately involved. Dee's notion of framing a quilt is in stark contrast to the frame on which the quilts had been made, according to the mother: "First they had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them." For Dee's mother and her mother and sister, the value of the quilt has to do at least in part with the communal nature of its making. For the women who are, in Houston Baker's and Charlotte Pierce-Baker's words, "accustomed to living and working with fragments," the scraps and patches handed down through the generations and stitched into a meaningful and beautiful whole have a value all their own that Dee cannot even approximate when she declares them "priceless."

According to Dee, Maggie's problem is that she does not understand her "heritage," and as a consequence she will never make anything of herself. Maggie may not understand what Dee means by "heritage," but she "knows how to quilt," and furthermore she "can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts." Unlike her sister who is dressed in an outfit made out of whole cloth that is so loud it hurts her mother's eyes, Maggie's own scarred body resembles the faded patches of the quilt, where stitching resembles healing. She is literally making something of herself every day, just as she and her mother make things every day. Baker and Pierce-Baker call Maggie "the arisen goddess of Walker's story... the sacred figure who bears the scarifications of experience and knows how to convert patches into robustly patterned and beautifully quilted wholes." Dee's final dismissal of her sister—"She'll probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use"—is meant to sway the mother to her side. Instead, her mother suddenly sees through Dee's artistic frames, and contemptuously calling her "Miss Wangero," snatches

the quilts from her hands. She recognizes that like Maggie and herself, "quilts are designed for everyday use, pieced wholes defying symmetry and pattern,... signs of the sacred generations of women who have always been alien to a world of literate words and stylish fancy" (Baker and Pierce-Baker). Dee's final gesture is to put on a pair of sunglasses "that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin," which suggests that despite this lesson in what heritage really means, she will continue to see the world through the frames she chooses.

For Barbara Christian as well as Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, the mother's recognition of Maggie's connection to quilts and to quilting is crucial to the story. The mother's choice of Maggie over "Miss Wangero" signifies Walker's discovery of her own literary ancestor, thus writing in fiction a conclusion to the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Baker and Pierce-Baker argue that when Maggie finally smiles "a real smile" at the end of the story as she and her mother watch Dee's car disappear in a cloud of dust, it is because she knows her "mother's holy recognition of the scarred daughter's sacred status as quilter is the best gift of a hard-pressed womankind to the fragmented goddess of the present."

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stones for Students*, Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Tuten concentrates on analyzing the language of "Everyday Use" and relates how the characters' words reveal their personalities.

Commentaries on Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" typically center on Mama's awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage. Most readers agree that when Mama takes the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie, she confirms her younger daughter's self-worth: metaphorically, she gives Maggie her voice. Elaine Hedges, for example, refers to the "reconciliation scene" in which "Mama's gift of the family quilts to Maggie empowers the previously silenced and victimized daughter." The text underscores such a reading by stating that immediately after the incident Maggie sits with her "mouth open."

This story is distinctive, however, in that Walker stresses not only the importance of language but also the destructive effects of its misuse. Clearly, Dee privileges language over silence, as she demonstrates in her determination to be educated and in the importance she places on her name. Rather than providing a medium for newfound awareness and for community, however, verbal skill equips Dee to oppress and manipulate others and to isolate herself; when she lived at home, she read to her sister and mother "without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice." Mama recalls that Dee "washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand." Dee uses words to wash, burn, press, and shove. We are told that the "nervous girls" and "furtive boys" whom she regarded as her friends "worshiped the well-turned phrase" and her "scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye."

It is not surprising, dien, that Mama, mistrustful of language, expresses herself in the climactic scene of the story not through words but through deeds: she*hugs* Maggie to her, *drags* her in the room where Dee sits holding the quilts, *snatches* the quilts from Dee, and*dumps* them into Maggie's lap. Only as an afterthought does she speak at all, telling Dee to "take one or two of the others." Mama's actions, not her words, silence the daughter who has, up to this point, used language to control others and separate herself from the community: Mama tells us that Dee turns and leaves the room "without a word."

In much of Walker's work, a character's dawning sense of self is represented not only by the acquisition of an individual voice but also through integration into a community. Mama's new appreciation of Maggie is significant because it represents the establishment of a sisterhood between mother and daughter. Just before taking the quilts out of Dee's hands, Mama tells us, "I did something I never had done before." The "something" to which she refers is essentially two actions: Mama embraces Maggie and says "no" to Dee for the first time. Since we are told that she held Maggie when she was burned in the fire, and since Mama's personality suggests that she would most likely

hug her daughter often. She is of course referring not merely to the literal hug but to the first spiritual embrace, representing her decision no longer to judge her younger daughter by the shallow standards Dee embodies - criteria that Mama has been using to measure both Maggie and herself up until the climax of the story. When Mama acts on Maggie's behalf, she is responding to the largely nonverbal message that her younger daughter has been sending for some time, but which Mama herself has been unable fully to accept. Now Maggie and Mama are allied in their rejection of Dee's attempts to devalue their lifestyle, and their new sense of community enables Maggie to smile "a real smile, not scared." Significantly, the story ends with the two of them sitting in silence, "just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed."

Ultimately, however, Mama has the last word; it is she, after all, who tells the story. Yet her control over the text is won gradually. Walker employs an unusual narrative structure to parallel Mama's development as she strengthens her voice and moves toward community with Maggie. Rather than reporting the entire event in retrospect, Mama relates the first half of the story *as it occurs*, using present and future tenses up until the moment Dee announces her new name. The commentary that Mama makes about herself and Maggie in the first portion of the story is therefore made before the awakening that she undergoes during the quilt episode - before she is able to reject completely Dee's desire that she and Maggie be something that they are not. Prior to the encounter with Dee over the quilts, although Mama at times speaks sarcastically about Dee's selfish attitude, she nonetheless dreams repeatedly of appearing on a television program "the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake," wielding a "quick and witty tongue." Mama's distaste for Dee's egotism is tempered by her desire to be respected by her daughter. In part, then, Mama has come to define herself in terms of her failure to meet the standards of what Lindsey Tucker calls a "basically white middle-class identity" - the white-male-dominated system portrayed in the television show. When Mama holds up her own strengths next to those valued by Dee and the white Johnny Carson society, she sees herself as one poised always in a position of fear, "with one foot raised in flight."...

The subsequent action of the story, however, in no way supports Mama's reading of her younger daughter. Instead, Maggie's behavior - even her limited use of language - conveys disgust with her sister rather than envy and awe. She responds to Hakim-a-barber, to Dee's hair, and to the discussion over the name "Dee" with the guttural "uhnnnh," a sound of revulsion. Even prior to Dee's arrival, when Mama recalls [Dee's] vow never to bring any friends home with her lest she be embarrassed, Maggie questions, "Mama, when did Dee ever have any friends? " She further reveals her distaste for Dee not by standing hopelessly, as her mother had predicted, but by acting decisively: she pulls away when Hakim-a-barber tries to hug her; she acts uninterested, her hand "limp as a fish," when he tries to teach her an unfamiliar handshake; and when she hears Dee asking for the quilts that are hers by right, she drops something noisily in the kitchen and slams the door. Whereas her mother describes Maggie as "cowering behind me," Maggie's first remarks are unsolicited, direct, and informed: "Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash. ... His name was Henry, but they called him Stash." Her mother's observation that Maggie's voice was "so low you almost couldn't hear her"

merely amplifies the vast difference between Dee's aggressive, oppressive, self-seeking use of words and Maggie's calm, selective, community-building use of language.

The story shifts abruptly to the past tense immediately after Dee declares that she has changed her name. Up until now, Mama has been caught in the tension between her annoyance with Dee and her instinctive desire to be "the way my daughter would want me to be." Yet when Dee goes so far as to disown her family identity, Mama reaches a watershed. As Hirsch explains, Mama has previously been unable to express her anger at Dee, but now her older daughter has pushed her too far; now she is able to objectify the situation, to distance herself from it. The use of present-tense verbs in the first half of the story suggests less narrative authority: if Mama is telling the events as they happen, she is merely reacting. By shifting to the past tense, Walker strengthens Mama's voice, giving her more control. That the tense shift is subtle - it is buried in the very center of the story, in the middle of a conversation - underscores the fact that although Mama has crossed an important line, she is as yet unable fully to recognize or articulate her new position. As the story moves toward the turning point, however, she gains increasing emotional distance from Dee and is ultimately able to tell her "no."

Until midway through the story, Dee's abuse of language appears to have successfully undermined the hierarchy privileging language over silence in most of Walker's works. Walker, however, cleverly derails Dee's efforts to subvert language by giving Mama more narrative control as the story unfolds - authority that she uses to affirm her allegiance to Maggie and to assert her emotional freedom from Dee. In the final paragraph of the story, Dee is not mentioned by name at all. Instead, Mama mentions only "the sunglasses," which she and Maggie find amusing, and the "car dust," which settles as Dee rides away. Maggie, on the other hand, is mentioned twice by name and is referred to a third time when Mama describes the two of them sitting together on the porch. Dee's absence in the final lines contrasts with her overbearing presence in the beginning of Mama's story, when she says, "I will wait for her" and "Maggie will be nervous." Indeed, in the end, Dee's oppressive voice is mute, for Mama has narrated her out of the story altogether.

Source: Nancy Tuten, "Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'," in *Exphcator*, Volume 51, No 2, Winter, 1993, pp 125-28

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Baker and Pierce-Baker talk about the tradition of quilting in the African-American community, a ritual of creating something out of scraps, an often overlooked indigenous American art form.

A patch is a fragment. It is a vestige of wholeness that stands as a sign of loss and a challenge to creative design. As a remainder or remnant, the patch may symbolize rupture and impoverishment; it may be defined by the faded glory of the already gone. But as a fragment, it is also rife with explosive potential of the yet-to-be-discovered. Like woman, it is a liminal element between wholes.

Weaving, shaping, sculpting, or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos. Such activity represents a nonce response to ceaseless scattering; it constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal. A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora.

Traditional African cultures were scattered by the European slave trade throughout the commercial time and space of the New World. The transmutation of quilting, a European, feminine tradition, into a black women's folk art, represents an innovative fusion of African cloth manufacture, piecing, and applique" with awesome New World experiences—and expediencies. The product that resulted was, in many ways, a double patch. The hands that pieced the master's rigidly patterned quilts by day were often the hands that crafted a more functional design in slave cabins by night. The quilts of Afro-America offer a *sui generis* context (a weaving together) of experiences and a storied, vernacular representation of lives conducted in the margins, ever beyond an easy and acceptable wholeness. In many ways, the quilts of Afro-America resemble the work of all those dismembered gods who transmute fragments and remainders into the light and breath of a new creation. And the sorority of quiltmakers, fragment weavers, holy patchers, possesses a sacred wisdom that it hands down from generation to generation of those who refuse the center for the ludic and unconfined spaces of the margins....

The Johnson women, who populate the generations represented in Walker's short story "Everyday Use," are inhabitants of southern cabins who have always worked with "scraps" and seen what they could make of them. The result of their labor has been a succession of mothers and daughters surviving the ignominies of Jim Crow life and passing on ancestral blessings to descendants. The guardians of the Johnson homestead when the story commences are the mother—"a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands"—and her daughter Maggie, who has remained with her "chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground" ten or twelve years ago. The mood at the story's beginning is one of ritualistic "waiting": "I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon," The subject awaited is the other daughter, Dee. Not only

has the yard (as ritual ground) been prepared for the arrival of a goddess, but the sensibilities and costumes of Maggie and her mother have been appropriately attuned for the occasion. The mother daydreams of television shows where parents and children are suddenly—and pleasantly—reunited, banal shows where chatty hosts oversee tearful reunions. In her fantasy, she weighs a hundred pounds less, is several shades brighter in complexion, and possesses a devastatingly quick tongue.

She returns abruptly to real life meditation, reflecting on her own heroic, agrarian accomplishments in slaughtering hogs and cattle and preparing their meat for winter nourishment. She is a robust provider who has gone to the people of her church and raised money to send her light-complexioned, lithe-figured, and ever-dissatisfied daughter Dee to college. Today, as she waits in the purified yard, she notes the stark differences between Maggie and Dee and recalls how the "last dingy gray board of the house [fell] in toward the red-hot brick chimney" when her former domicile burned. Maggie was scarred horribly by the fire, but Dee, who had hated the house with an intense fury, stood "off under the sweet gum tree ... a look of concentration on her face." A scarred and dull Maggie, who has been kept at home and confined to everyday offices, has but one reaction to the fiery and vivacious arrival of her sister: "I hear Maggie suck in her breath. 'Uhnnnh,' is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. 'Uhnnnh'."...

The dramatic conflict of the story surrounds the definition of holiness. The ritual purification of earth and expectant atmosphere akin to that of Beckett's famous drama ("I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon.") prepare us for the narrator's epiphanic experience at the story's conclusion.

Near the end of "Everyday Use," the mother (who is the tale's narrator) realizes that Dee (a.k.a., Wangero) is a *fantasy* child, a perpetrator and victim of: "words, lies, other folks's habits." The energetic daughter is as frivolously careless of other peoples' lives as the fiery conflagration that she had watched ten years previously. Assured by the makers of American fashion that "black" is currently "beautiful," she has conformed her own "style" to that notion. Hers is a trendy "blackness" cultivated as "art" and costume. She wears "a dress down to the ground.. .bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits." And she says of quilts she has removed from a trunk at the foot of her mother's bed: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts! She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use." "Art" is, thus, juxtaposed with "everyday use" in Walker's short story, and the fire goddess Dee, who has achieved literacy only to burn "us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know," is revealed as a perpetuator of institutional theories of aesthetics. (Such theories hold that "art" is, in fact, defined by social institutions such as museums, book reviews, and art dealers.) Of the two quilts that she has extracted from the trunk, she exclaims: "But they're 'priceless.'" And so the quilts are by "fashionable" standards of artistic value, standards that motivate the answer that Dee provides to her mother's question: "'Well,' I said, stumped. 'What would you do with them?"' Dee's answer: "Hang them." The stylish daughter's entire life has been one of "framed" experience; she has always sought a fashionably "aesthetic" distance from southern expediencies. (And how unlike quilt frames that signal social activity and a coming to

completeness are her frames.) Her concentrated detachment from the fire, which so nearly symbolizes her role vis-avis the Afro-American community (her black friends "worshipped ... the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye") is characteristic of her attitude. Her goals include the appropriation of exactly what she needs to remain fashionable in the eyes of a world of pretended wholeness, a world of banal television shows, framed and institutionalized art, and Polaroid cameras—devices that instantly process and record experience as "framed" photograph. Ultimately, the framed Polaroid photograph represents the limits of Dee's vision....

What is at stake in the world of Walker's short story, then, is not the prerogatives of Afro-American women as "wayward artists." Individualism and a flouting of convention in order to achieve "artistic" success constitute acts of treachery in "Everyday Use." For Dee, if she is anything, is a fashionable denizen of America's art/fantasy world. She is removed from the "everyday uses" of a black community that she scorns, misunderstands, burns. Certainly, she is "unconventionally" black. As such, however, she is an object of holy contempt from the archetypal weaver of black wholeness from tattered fragments. Maggie's "Uhnnnh" and her mother's designation "Miss Wangero" are gestures of utter contempt. Dee's sellout to fashion and fantasy in a television-manipulated world of "artistic" frames is a representation of the complicity of the clerks. Not "art," then, but use or function is the signal in Walker's fiction of sacred creation.

Quilts designed for everyday use, pieced wholes defying symmetry and pattern, are signs of the scarred generations of women who have always been alien to a world of literate words and stylish fantasies. The crafted fabric of Walker's story is the very weave of blues and jazz traditions in the Afro-American community, daringly improvisational modes that confront breaks in the continuity of melody (or theme) by riffing. The asymmetrical quilts of southern black women are like the off-centered stomping of the jazz solo or the innovative musical showmanship of the blues interlude. They speak a world in which the deceptively shuffling Maggie is capable of a quick change into goddess, an unlikely holy figure whose dues are paid in full. Dee's anger at her mother is occasioned principally by the mother's insistence that paid dues make Maggie a more likely bearer of sacredness, tradition, and true value than the "brighter" sister. "You just don't understand," she says to her mother. Her assessment is surely correct where institutional theories and systems of "art" are concerned. The mother's cognition contains no categories for framed art. The mother works according to an entirely different scale of use and value, finally assigning proper weight to the virtues of Maggie and to the ancestral importance of the pieced quilts that she has kept out of use for so many years. Smarting, perhaps, from Dee's designation of the quilts as "old-fashioned," the mother has buried the covers away in a trunk. At the end of Walker's story, however, she has become aware of her own mistaken value judgments, and she pays homage that is due to Maggie. The unlikely daughter is a griot of the vernacular who remembers actors and events in a distinctively black "historical" drama....

But the larger appeal of "Everyday Use" is its privileging of a distinctively woman's craft as the signal mode of confronting chaos through a skillful blending of patches. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's skill as a fabric worker completely transmutes the order of Afro-American existence. Not only do her talents with a needle enable her to wear the pants

in the family, they also allow her to become the maker of pants par excellence. Hence, she becomes a kind of unifying goddess of patch and stitch, an instructress of mankind who bestows the gift of consolidating fragments. Her abusive husband Albert says: "When I was growing up ... I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it." "Well," says Celie, "nobody gon laugh at you now.... Here, help me stitch in these pockets."

A formerly "patched" separateness of woman is transformed through fabric craft into a new unity. Quilting, sewing, stitching are bonding activities that begin with the godlike authority and daring of women, but that are given (as a gift toward community) to men. The old disparities are transmuted into a vision best captured by the scene that Shug suggests to Celie: "But, Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns." The heavenly city of quilted design is a form of unity wrested by the sheer force of the woman quiltmaker's will from chaos. As a community, it stands as both a sign of the potential effects of black women's creativity in America, and as an emblem of the effectiveness of women's skillful confrontation of patches. Walker's achievement as a southern, black, woman novelist is her own successful application of the holy patching that was a staple of her grandmother's and great-grandmother's hours of everyday ritual. "Everyday Use" is, not surprisingly, dedicated to "your grandmama": to those who began the line of converting patches into works of southern genius.

Source: Houston A Baker, Jr. and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'," in The Southern Review, Vol. 21, No. 3, July, 1985, pp. 706-20.

Compare and Contrast

1971: The Supreme Court upholds busing students to various schools in order for them to achieve greater racial integration.

1995: Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam leads the Million Man March in Washington, DC, as a show of solidarity and an opportunity for black men to publicly declare their support for family values.

1974: A black militant organization called the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnaps heiress Patty Hearst, forces her to rob a bank, and commits several other crimes.

1996: Drive-by shootings spurred by gang rivalries claim the lives of African-American musicians Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.

1973: Census bureau statistics place the poverty rate for a family of two at $2,984 per year.

1995: The poverty threshold for a family of two is $10,259 per year.

What Do I Read Next?

The Color Purple, Walker's novel about black women who persevere despite oppression by society and abuse by the men in their lives, established the author as a voice of 1970s black feminist ideals.

Song of Solomon (1977) by Toni Morrison offers a counterpart to "Everyday Use" but with a male point of view. Through a series of encounters with friends and relatives, Macon ("Milkman ") Dead HI learns the value of the past and the importance of human connections.

The Women of Brewster Place (1982) by Gloria Naylor tells the story of seven African-American women who live on a dead-end urban street. Though their lives are often painful, they main- tain their spiritual strength and use it to strengthen their community.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965, co-written with Alex Haley) was a cornerstone of the Black Power Movement, whose ideals Dee Johnson and Hakim-a-barber espouse. Malcolm X examines his early life as a hustler, defends his controversial social and political ideals, and explains his conversion to the Islamic faith.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance who was rediscovered and popularized by Walker, is the story of one black woman's effort to claim her own sense of independence.

Further Study

O'Brien, John. "AliceWalker,"*Interviews with Black Writers*, Livenght, 1973, pp. 185-211.

An interview with Walker conducted near the time in which she wrote "Everyday Use."

Short Story Criticism, Vol. 5, Gale Research, 1990, pp 400-24.

Excerpted criticism of Walker's short fiction.

Winchell, Donna Haisty. *Alice Walker*, Twayne, 1992 This book offers an overview of Walker's life and career, including explanatory chapters on each of her works The third chapter contains analysis of the stories in the collection in which "Everyday Use" first appeared.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Data Capture
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535