

Katrina Hook
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The Threads of Heritage

One of the absolutes in life is that a pair of sisters will either end up exactly alike or opposites, with no option of an in between. "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker perfectly exemplifies this motif through the dynamic of Dee and her mother as the family discusses the future possession of some of their history. They both experience a few of the same major life events yet react to them very differently. Alice Walker unwinds the intricate threads of heritage by comparing Dee's entitlement to tradition as an accessory to Mama's humility and belief that possessions are to be used in a practical manner, or rather, everyday use.

To Dee, her past is something she was ashamed of as a kid but grew to want to display. Dee is introduced to the readers as a very entitled character. When the narrator, her mother, introduces Dee to us, she said, "Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature" (656). Dee was the confident one of the family. She told people what was on her mind and expected to be allowed to do whatever she wanted. Dee was intelligent, her mother remembered, as "she used to read to us without pity... she washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Because of this, she had her eyes set on greater things than her mother and sister. She wasn't content sitting in a homely house in a neighborhood that didn't respect people who were different, in a place where she would stand out and be told what to do. Being poor didn't suit Dee's personality. "Dee wanted nice things," her mother said, "She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts" (656). She had such a drive to get the things she wanted that she

wouldn't set any sentimentality get in her way. To her, being poor was a choice. She told her mother that "no matter where we 'choose' to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends" (657). Dee was blatantly honest about the embarrassment her past caused her. She wanted things that blended in with the people around her, and a fancy house she could be proud of. Her drive got to the point where her mother began having dreams of an alternate world where her daughter looked up to her, but instead of resembling herself, "I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue" (656). Dee wanted so badly to blend in... until all of a sudden, she didn't. When Dee arrives to visit her mother and sister, her change of appearance catches them off guard. Dee steps out of the car to reveal "A dress so loud it hurts my eyes," and hair that "stands straight up like the wool on a sheep" (658). Abruptly, her heritage is something she wants to wear loud on display. She no longer wishes "uncooked barely pancake" skin upon her mother, nor glistening hair. Instead, she greets her family in Swahili and begins to take pictures of them. "Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included," her mother says (658). The house she once hated was now the center of her visit. She then proudly claims that "Dee" is dead, reintroducing herself as Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, saying, "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after people that oppress me" (658). Now seeking retribution, she has a whole new relationship with her past. Ignoring the tradition behind her given name, she now sees her past as something to idolize. She's seeking retribution, hoping to undo the whitewashing that has been done to her family. Or is it performative activism? When admiring the inside of the house, even

she admits she never appreciated it before. “Everything pleased her,” her mother said, and Dee/Wangero noted that “I never knew how lovely these benches are” (659). Dee/Wangero proceeds to walk around and point out household items she wants to lay claim to, like the butter churn: “I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table” (659). She makes it even clearer that she views their heritage as something to be displayed, not used, when she fights over the hand-stitched quilts she previously declined ownership of years earlier. She claimed, “Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts! She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use,” implying that practical usage was a disgrace to their origin (660). Dee/Wangero, distraught over her mother siding with Maggie, retorts by saying to her sister, “you ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It’s really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you’d never know it” (661). Dee/Wangero firmly insists that by using their possessions as they are intended, they are giving in to the oppressors she is standing against.

Dee’s mother believes in knowing your place, and that heritage is something you can hold on to without putting it on display. She is a tough woman, initially claiming, “I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man,” but is fearful of her oppressors, as “Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye” (656). She was always skeptical of Dee’s actions, wondering if she hated Maggie or even wanted their house to burn in the fire that scarred her sister’s skin. Mama grew up in a very different era than her children. While she and the church raised money for Dee to go to a fancy school, Mama’s education abruptly ended after the second grade. “Don’t ask me why,” she said, “in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now” (657). Mama is a reflecting woman, who keeps the past with her. She is stuck in the time when her daughters were younger, around the time when their first house burned. She said, “Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie’s arms sticking to me, her hair smoking

and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes” (656). She found no sense in Dee’s name change, even though she respectfully went along with it, wondering why she should even feel the need to question its origination. Mama believes their possessions should retain their practical uses, that the past can be remembered and appreciated better by getting use out of the items their family passed down. When Dee argued that Maggie would put the quilts to everyday use, she responded, “I reckon she would. God knows I been saving ‘em for long enough with nobody using ‘em. I hope she will!” (660). Mama views her heritage as something to respect yet to be practical about.

In conclusion, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" weaves an intricate narrative that explores the complexities of heritage, identity, and the evolving relationships within a family. The contrasting perspectives of Dee and her mother show the differing paths individuals can take in reconciling with their past.