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Sisterhood:

An Analysis of Dee in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker uses her voice to point out how the white community treated black people. Still, by doing so, she also shows her readers in her story "Everyday Use" how the cruelty of society divided the black community, such as family, friends, mother and daughters, and sisters, against each other. "Everyday Use" narrates the relationship between a mother and her two daughters; the mother, the narrator of the story, has a way of describing her children's personalities, which causes many readers only to see the wrong side of the first child, Dee (Wangero). Many journal articles, such as "Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use" by David Cowart, focused mostly on Dee's attitude and bad treatment towards her family. However, we can also find other articles, such as "Fight vs. Flight: A Re-evaluation of Dee in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"" by Susan Farrell, which accuses others of targeting Wangero without understanding her motive. This story has different point of view depending on who is reading it, even though it is in the first person. Moreover, it seems like Walker is challenging her readers to see beyond the words they read and uses the term "quilts" as the story's primary focus.

One critic, David Cowart, believes that Dee, throughout the entire story, acts selfishly and has bad behavior for trying to reject something that characterizes who she is. We all agree with the article “Heritage and Deracination in Walker’s “Everyday Use”” by Cowart, but we should admit that we once wanted to stay away from our past because it can drag us down. Even if Dee (Wangero) has all the right to change who she is at any moment of her life because she wants something better, Dee should have approached the situation differently because the way Dee (Wangero) acts makes it seem like she wants to erase the most important people of her life and leave them in the past; while she navigates her future freely. Cowart did not hesitate to put Wangero’s actions on full display for everyone to know how “Dee is rejecting her family heritage and identity” (Farrell 183) and is somehow ungrateful for the opportunities she was gifted with to go to school, for her mother stopped going to school in her second grade because the American society had closed the school, and Mama did not know the reason for such an act because “in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now” (Walker 338). African Americans did not want trouble, so they stayed in their place and did not bother others with questions. And then Dee wanted to change things and would not shy out and fight back if needed, but Sam Whitsitt, in his article “In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,”” believes that “Mama has this capacity to risk” (Whitsitt 451) things more than Dee has ever did even after all the changes in her life.

The way Dee carries herself and behaves one may think she is above everyone, including her mother and sister. It is interesting how Dee quickly talks about her heritage when the daughter did not give it much value before; we can realize her past lack of care for the quilts when Mama says how Dee found them “old-fashioned, out of style” (Walker 342) when she wanted to give her one before going to college. It is as if Dee did not want her sister to have what

was already hers because she assumed Maggie would not know how to use the quilts that figuratively represents “herstory, history, and tradition, binding women, and men, to the past and the past to the present” (Whitsitt 445), which led Cowart to point out how her action was out-of-hand. He states:

Certainly the quilts over which Wangero and her mother quarrel represent a heritage vastly more personal and immediate than the intellectual and deracinated daughter can see; indeed, they represent a heritage she has already discarded, for she no longer shares a name with those whose lives, in scraps of cast-off clothing, the quilts transmute. (Cowart 179)

She is ready to fight over what she calls “priceless” quilts because Maggie or even Mama does not know how to use them properly. She claims the quilts as heritage that Maggie would “put ... to everyday use” (Walker 342) but fire back again by saying that they have no economic value. Whitsitt thinks that Wangero “provokes the question of value, of economy, of representation” (Whitsitt 457) by categorizing something her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and aunt had put so much love into doing because they wanted to give their descendants something of value.

In addition to finally noticing the objects that compose her mother’s house, she gets on a mission to take the things she finds interesting now for decoration. When she enters the house, it feels like her eyes finally see the beauty that composed the house where her mother and sister lived for a while, while she could go explore things outside of the “ghetto.” Everyone wants to know why she seems to discover the house for the first time when she says, “I never knew how lovely these benches are” (Walker 341), but each of us knows why, and it is because she did not

take time to appreciate the little things in her house before this very moment. She was planning her escape from a place she believed was cutting out her freedom. The idea of using these objects as decoration is not the problem; decoration has something meaningful to an ensemble, but the way she turns her said heritage into beauty only without any care as to where they come from and who made them made her seem more heartless than she is. By wanting to take everything, she insults the works done from generation to generation in her family and the people who had made them. When she said that her sister, Maggie was too “backward” to know how to use the quilts because she did not know things of value, she “indirectly also includes Mama” (Whitsitt 456). We can gather that she wants to cherish what she finally understands as her heritage, but if Dee wants to claim something as heritage, she should first know its origin and value. We can see how Maggie knows everything and is willing to let her belongings to her sister because she does not need them to “remember Grandma Dee” (Walker 343) or any other members of her family who have created something valuable made of “scraps of dresses [of] Grandma Dee...Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts... [And] Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War” (Walker 342).

Wangero wants her family to improve their living style when she cannot do the same with her attitude. It feels like while she was away from her mother and sister, she suddenly has a revelation about her culture and adapts her life to it by becoming someone who erases herself from her family picture, figuratively and literally. She hopes that changing her name to an African name and how she is fading away from what composed her family would make everything that she does not want to see or interact with vanish in thin air. However, Cowart intervenes by accusing Dee of having high expectations of her changes to justify the decisions she makes; she thinks that:

The African American past can be rescued only by being commodified. She wants to make the lid of the butter churn into a centerpiece for her table...to hang quilts on the wall... [And] to do what white people do with the cunning and quaint implements and products of the past. [Dee] fails to see the mote in her own eye when she reproaches her mother and her sister for a failure to value their heritage-she, who wants only to preserve that heritage as the negative index to her own sophistication. (Coward 175)

Sometimes being visionary should not stop someone from accepting where they come from; she thinks that her ancient name, which was the name of her grandmother and aunt, originated from her oppressors. However, we cannot disagree with her for wanting to "change what she foresees as Mama's fairly dismal future, a vision of her future Mama herself seems to reinforce rather than dispute" (Farrell 182), and we cannot also ignore how her words have led Mama to fight back and protect her heritage. Although her new interest in the African culture and her pride in the family's heritage are heartwarming, it feels like an illusion to hide the parts of her life she wants to escape.

People will always find flaws in everything because it is human nature, and we know everyone has something to say about everything, whether it is positive thought or negative. Before reading one of the academic articles, "Fight vs. Flight: A Re-evaluation of Dee in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use,"" we would have agreed with many critics made on the work "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker. However, now we can see that each story has two or more sides to it. Moreover, we should know both sides before giving our judgments; it is easy to say that Wangero is selfish and does not value her heritage as she claims to, but on the other hand, there is nowhere in the story where Walker mentions something about Dee not caring for her heritage; she is just embracing it differently through the quilts. Whitsitt mentions that every object Dee has touched or wanted has a special connection to her, especially the quilts because

“How one defines Dee is how one defines the quilt, and not to see a doubleness in Dee is not to see a doubleness in the quilt itself” (Whitsitt 458). Dee (Wangero), by wanting to take the “churn” or “the old quilts” for decorations for her home successfully, “offers a view of heritage and a strategy for contemporary African Americans to cope with an oppressive society that is, in some ways, more valid than that offered by Mama and Maggie.” (Farrell 179). Every African American had followed a law that allowed privileged people to stomp on them without mercy, so Dee freed herself from those laws by adopting a culture that accepted her.

African American authors have their way of exposing the situation they were forced to live in because of their oppressors. When Alice Walker, including other women in the twentieth century, decided to use their pen “[instead of] the needle,” people saw it as “a transgressive act which the metaphor of the needle facilitated.” (Whitsitt 445). In the story “Everyday Use,” Dee has chosen her education from quilting, even when it is the norm in her culture. Each African American mother taught their daughters how to make quilts to have something treasured to pass from mother to daughter. Furthermore, even though we have to agree with many articles, including the ones introduced throughout the paper’s development, that Wangero (Dee) is insensitive and “capricious in her social activism” (Farrell 186), we can see that she brings something positive in her visit. By being obnoxious, she makes her mother realize that she was dancing on her tippy toes around her daughter while giving less attention to Maggie. Whitsitt states that Dee has finally triggered something that has been sleeping inside her mother for so long, and “in spite of herself, brings Mama to claim a voice” (Whitsitt 454) and finally puts Maggie first.

Works Cited

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