

Lindsay Ryans

Dr. Babiha

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Heritage

“Everyday Use” by Alice Walker is a short story based on the importance of one's heritage. Dee, the eldest daughter, always wanted to be different. She was ashamed of her past and the heritage that was passed along to her. Dee disregards the significance of her family heritage in her desire for change. She is ignorant to her own culture and claims a false sense of tradition. Dee looks at her heritage as something she can put on display; as long as it is fashionable and fits in with her taste. She has no real connection to anything and has become detached from the culture that she is trying to claim.

Dee's name offers a good example of her ignorance towards her heritage. When her mother attempts to call her, she is immediately informed that her name is not Dee, but Wangero Leewamika Kemanjo. She has chosen this new name to express her solidarity with her African ancestors and to reject the oppression caused by the name given to her. She feels that her new name is more appropriate in representing herself. Dee fails to understand that her given name goes back several generations and is therefore more a part of her heritage than her newly adopted African name. Her new name might have sounded authentically African but it had no relationship to a person she knew, nor to a personal history that sustained her.

Dee's confusion about her inheritance emerges in her attitude toward the quilts and other household items. To Dee, artifacts such as the benches or the quilts are strictly aesthetic objects. It never occurs to her that they are valuable symbols of her heritage. Her family created these

objects because they could not afford to buy them. Her admiration for them seems to reflect a cultural trend toward valuing homemade objects, rather than a sincere interest in her heritage. The fact that she was offered the quilts before going off to college but rejected them as “old-fashioned, out of style” provides an ironic context, for she now wants them for that specific reason.

Walker also portrays Dee’s ignorance of her heritage through her younger sister Maggie. This proves true when Dee decides that she would like to take a churn top and dasher into her possession. When Dee looks at the churn top and dasher she sees how great they would look as a centerpiece on her table. Although she admires the items, she has no clue as to who made them. It is Maggie who informs Dee that the dasher was whittled by their Aunt Dee’s first husband. It is important that Maggie knows the history of the dasher, because Dee who knew nothing of its history in the family, took it selfishly. Maggie shows another example of understanding her heritage when she offers to let Dee have the quilts, instead of keeping them herself. She does not care if she gets the quilts passed down to her. She does not need these objects to remind her of her past. She has the memories and she knows the history; which to her is far more valuable than any artifact.

Throughout the story, Walker shows how heritage is mainly influenced by knowledge and customs passed from one generation to another. Unfortunately, this knowledge will not be passed down to Dee’s family if she ever decides to bear children. There will be no history of the precious and invaluable items that reside in her house. These items, just like Dee, are nothing more than beautiful objects to look at; full of a rich cultural history which will be kept secret from the world.