Everyday Use Essay, Research Paper

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Through contrasting family members and views in Everyday Use , Alice Walker illustrates the importance of understanding our present life in relation to the traditions of our own people and culture. Using careful descriptions and attitudes, Walker demonstrates which factors contribute to the values of one s heritage and culture; she illustrates that these are represented not by the possession of objects or mere appearances, but by one s lifestyle and attitude. In Everyday Use Walker personifies the different sides of culture and heritage in the characters of Dee and the mother (the narrator). Dee can be seen to represent a materialistic, complex, and modern way of life where culture and heritage are to be valued only for their trendy-ness and aesthetic appeal. Mother on the other hand, represents a simple content way of life where culture and heritage are valued for both its usefulness as well as its personal significance. The story clearly endorses Mama s simple, unsophisticated view of heritage, and shows disdain for Dee s materialistic connection to her heritage. This is demonstrated from the outset of the short story, we learn very quickly that the mother (narrator) has inherited many customs and traditions from her ancestors. She describes herself as a large big-boned woman with rough man-working hands (485). She also describes here various abilities including, I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing. I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledgehammer and had the meat hung up to chill by nightfall. (485) While these feats are not extraordinary, Walker exemplifies what Mother has learned from her ancestors, and that being resilient and tough is a part of her heritage. Mother is very proud of her abilities and accomplishments. Mrs. Johnson, the mother, describes Dee as light skinned with nice hair and a full figure (486). She recounts Dee s childhood and her appreciation of nice things. She was not the least upset when the family home burned to the ground while she was just a girl, Why don t you do a dance around the ashes? I d wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much. (486) Dee s character in the story is a direct relation to any number of people in society that do not know or are confused about their heritage. She is struggling to create an identity for herself, and is confused as to what it encompasses. She grasps at African tradition and culture, yet fails to acknowledge her own African American culture. This happened all over America, particularly in the North, in the 1960 s, following the civil rights movement. Dee is misconstruing her heritage as material goods, as opposed to her ancestor s habits and way of life. This may be due in part to her leaving her hometown and becoming an educated, sophisticated young woman. Dee s direct heritage is that of African Americans. When Dee informs her mother and Maggie she has changed her name she states, I couldn t stand it anymore, being named after the people that oppress me. (488) Dee s mother is quick to point out that Dee is in fact named after her aunt, who was named after her grandmother. While Dee may not be an African name it is based on ancestors, tradition, and the heritage of the Johnson family. Dee discards this name in favor of an African name, Wangero, that, although is African, is not directly related to her heritage. It has not been passed down through generations, nor does it symbolize anything directly related to her family. The contradiction of culture and heritage becomes more evident as the quilts are introduced into the story. While the Johnson s sit down to lunch, Dee begins to admire the butter churn and the dasher. Although she has a brief recollection of Uncle Buddy whittling the churn, she is much more interested in the churn top as a centerpiece for her alcove table. Following lunch Dee re-discovers the quilts. The quilts were composed of an eclectic array of material including, scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece that was from Great Grandpa Ezra s uniform he wore in the Civil War. (489) Dee decides she wants the quilts to hang on the wall and deems the priceless. However, Mrs. Johnson clearly remembers offering Dee a quilt to take away for university and Dee proclaiming they were old fashioned and out of style. The argument over the quilts symbolizes the black woman s dilemma in confronting the future. After Mrs. Johnson confirms she is giving the quilts to Maggie, Dee states, You just don t understand Your heritage . (491) Dee believes heritage to be as tangible as a quilt on the wall or a quaint butter churn in the alcove. She is aware the items are hand made by her ancestors, nevertheless remains unaware of the knowledge and history behind them. Mrs. Johnson knows the traditions and history behind the quilts; they put their ancestor s memories to everyday use. While Dee may be working towards a period of enlightenment, she certainly did not demonstrate the insight that may come as she matures. Through Everyday Use Walker shows that culture is neither name changes nor speaking a foreign tongue. One s culture and heritage are taught, from one generation to the next, not suddenly picked up or acquired. A person who possesses real heritage and culture make use of it every day of their life.