Heritage vs. Hostage: The Details of Exploring an Origin in Walker’s “Everyday Use”

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Each person has a heritage. The individual ancestry of each and every one of us becomes significant, because we know the importance of our past. But do some people take this heritage and background to an extreme? It depends on the person. Heritage can become more superficial than sincere. Do we truly want to explore our origins for satisfaction in our own hearts or do we want to show off who we are in arrogance? These questions can be explored in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.” The differences in heritage are found in Dee, Maggie, and Mrs. Johnson, also known as Mama. The purpose of this essay is to show how Walker’s life has made her become the writer she is; to see how details, such as last names, play an important role in heritage; to examine superficiality as a source to satisfaction of knowing one’s origin; to discover what true embrace of heritage is within relationships and characters; and to explore the different ways Walker criticizes the Back to Africa movement.

Alice Walker is one of the most inspirational writers in her lifetime. Born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker is born into her Southern culture and embodies this detail in her work (Christian 563). Christian writes, “Alice Walker is internationally recognized as a writer of the American south and activist in the world” (563). Walker is the epitome of a feministic, Southern writer, and this has made her who she is today. As a writer, her impact includes receiving the Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple, and this accomplishment has caused her to be the first female African American, fictional writer to receive a Pulitzer Prize (Christian).

As a child, Walker went through trauma, which has made her who she is as a writer. Walker, at eight-years-old, lost sight in one of her eyes when her brother shot her accidently with a BB gun. This experience caused a scar to settle over her eye, which reminded her of the horrible memory and the mark she had to live with. But this experience helps her become the woman and writer she is now: “But because she learned how to transform her wound into a ‘warrior mark,’ she could ‘see’ other warrior marks, such as the effects of racist violence on southern black folk…” (Christian). This traumatic experience has created the creative flow Walker now writes beautifully with.

We see next that last names play a role in the exploration of our heritage. Names such as “Smith” show descendents of a family of blacksmiths and “Baker”, descendents of a family of bakers. Also, names such as “von Borstel” shows that one comes from Borstel, Germany. The Johnsons, in Walker’s “Everyday Use,” have heritage within their name especially Dee, whose name has been passed down from generation to generation. “Dee” was a name given
to one of her ancestors by their owner (a slave-owner), which is one reason why Dee has changed her name to “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo.” Mama asks, “‘What happened to ‘Dee’?’ I wanted to know. ‘She’s dead,’ Wangero said. ‘I couldn’t bear it any longer being named after the people who oppress me’” (479). Dee believes her name identifies her as a part of slavery, which is something she does not want to be associated with (Farrell 179). This begins the idea of superficial heritage. We also see Dee’s boyfriend, Asalamalakim, with a name of African origin. Walker here implements humor within the idea of African heritage: “After I tripped over it two or three times he told me just to call him Hakim-a-barber. I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn’t think he was, so I didn’t ask” (480). Within the mixed emotions of the Back to Africa movement that Walker portrays, we see her humorous tactics as if she were trying to lighten up the subject.

Superficiality is another undertone in “Everyday Use,” derived from factors such as names, antiques, clothes and so forth. We see superficial heritage versus spiritual heritage within Dee and Maggie respectively. When Dee comes home, she decides she wants some of her ancestors’ possessions, and the reason she wants them is for looks, not feelings. They are “cool”, in a sense, because they show that she actually cares – at least that is what she believes. But in reality, there is no care in her heart for her family, from whom these items have been passed down. Decoration for her household is more important than an actual caring thought in Dee’s mind. In contrast, Maggie embraces her ancestor’s belongings and puts them into everyday use in her poverty-stricken life. She genuinely treasures these generational gifts, and spiritually, she appreciates her own heritage within that use. For Maggie and Mama, heritage is intimate (Farrell 179). This heritage comes from within the heart, unlike Dee’s careless sense of heritage.

African women, in the past, had to use what was accessible. Christian writes, “Treated by society like ‘mules of the world,’ black women used what was available to them—cooking, storytelling, gardening, quilting—to create functional works of art and established artistic models for later generations of African American women” (566). Quilting is known as an important part of African American culture. Because of writers like Walker, quilting has become known as a part of folk art tradition: “In her Southern way, Walker cautions us in her story ‘Everyday Use’ (1973) that the quilt is not a priceless artifact. Rather the process of quilting is a living representation of the history of the people put to use” (Christian 566). This confirms the fact that Maggie truly knows how to sincerely embrace her heritage without superficiality. In White’s book she writes, “Then in a powerfully poignant plot twist, Maggie quietly announces that she need not own the quilts (‘[Dee] can have them, Mama’) to treasure their value” (234). Maggie truly shows her pride in her heritage without the superficiality.

We then see the superficiality in Dee, because of her want for the quilts
her ancestors had made; but instead of Maggie’s embrace of heritage, these quilts represent Dee’s heritage and culture as physical approval (Cowart 171). Also for Maggie, quilting is something she knows how to do. Walker writes, “She can always make some more,’ I said. ‘Maggie knows how to quilt’” (481). She mentally and spiritually knows how to quilt something, which shows the genuine non-superficial aspect of her belief in her own family history.

Dee and Maggie differ in many aspects. One lives an educated life away from her family, embracing the Back to Africa movement, is in a relationship and has the financial blanket she needs. The other lives at home, uneducated and embracing her own direct, simplistic heritage, with little money and a future marriage. Opposing completely, Dee and Maggie can also show many different characteristics, which can include a self-centered, prideful attitude versus a meek, immature spirit. We may see this as a good versus evil set up, but in reality, it is more complicated. Dee seems selfish and inconsiderate because of her name change and her arrogant attitude that is shown as she talks about the generational possessions her mother has. But we only view her as this inconsiderate being because of her sister, who meekly embraces the same heritage her mother loves and beholds. But is Dee really wrong in fighting for her African culture? In some ways, no, because we all need to embrace our origin – but she also does not consider the consequences of her behavior towards the significance of the quilts and how her mother and sister feel.

Maggie and Mama both have simplistic views of heritage: It is the bloodline which they have been born from; their own family history. For Dee, it is completely different, and that is where we have to decide if she is right or wrong in her choice. Her arrogance alone comes from the way she treats her family and her direct heritage, not the way she embraces her African culture.

Another reason Dee can be seen as the antagonist is because Mama is the narrator of the story. Her views may not be voiced within the story, but they are heard. As we read, we have to remember that Mama is the narrator and this is not a factual depiction of each of the sisters. Mama may portray Dee as a self-centered person because she might have unknown feelings of spite towards Dee. This might create the idea that Dee is rebellious against her own family. Maggie also might not be as passionate about her heritage, which can alter the opposition between Maggie and Dee. Mama might have spite towards Dee as well. For example, Dee left home to get a good education, and Mama was never fully educated: “I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down” (478). This might create jealousy within the mother and she hides that from the audience (Tuten 125). So does that mean Dee is not the inconsiderate, selfish person she seems to be? We honestly have to pull out our own depiction of Dee, and discover whether or not her selfish antics are really selfish at all.

Maggie and Mama are somewhat blind to the real aspects of heritage.
The ancestors who have passed down their names and traditions have been tortured in slavery, and Dee sees this. As said before, Maggie, Dee, and Mama's history comes in part from the people who oppressed them. We see Dee wanting to escape this identity by changing her name, getting an education and making an image for herself other than a poor, black girl. But Dee cannot change her family history through changing surface details. This leads to the different reasons which justify Dee's lack of excitement for her own family history. First of all, she seems embarrassed by the fact that her past ancestors were involved in something humiliating – and that is why Dee takes on a new history. Another reason she betrays her own bloodline might have to do with dislike of her mother and sister. Something about them might make Dee want to have a separate life and heritage. This leads back to the idea that Dee's selfish tactics are not as bad as they seem. Walker seems to make the Back to Africa movement look so selfish, but we have to read and see if this character is really an attack on the movement.

Both Mama and Dee have quite a bit to learn about heritage. Dee needs to embrace her own personal family history, and Mama needs to realize that her heritage is not just her own personal line of ancestors. This lack of realization comes from Mama and Maggie's lack of education – Dee has been formally educated and knows her African heritage. But even if someone is not formally educated about her origin, she can still be a true bearer of her culture. A true bearer of this African-American culture is a matter of opinion. Dee shows ideals that seem like she is true to her culture, but in other ways she has a misconstrued view. Maggie and Mama both have a very naïve and innocent view of their heritage and only embrace their own personal family history, but they could also embrace the Black Power Movement as well. Maggie seems to be the true bearer, someone who is sincerely proud of her heritage. As said before, Dee is not proud of her own bloodline.

In conclusion, Alice Walker's “Everyday Use” shows details in heritage, superficiality, and true embrace of our origin in a way that reveals how the Back to Africa movement is implicated in the story. We also see the life of Walker become a significant cause of her career and her writings. Walker shows many different sides to heritage and the way it can be embraced. Her genius includes the idea that heritage is more than just the small details. Many people in this world today want to know their ancestral background. Our ancestors give us hope – that our lives can be more than just sitting on computers, playing video games, eating unhealthy food, and so forth. We know that somewhere in our bloodstream, there is an amazing person who inspired people, and who helped someone in some way, shape or form. What can we take from this story? There is more out there for us – Dee may have had a selfish mind set, but through that, she could be the next Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King Jr.
Works Cited


