

# A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"

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## Abstract

This study explores Alice Walker's short story "Everyday use" (1973), with a particular focus on her use of the quilt as a powerful metaphor that underscores the significance of African American culture during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The research begins by contextualizing Walker's unique metaphorical deployment of the quilt, contrasting it with its representation in the works of other writers. It then delves into key scholarly interpretations, analyzing various critical perspectives that have shaped the understanding of the story's themes.

A central aspect of the study is the examination of the contrasting viewpoints of the main characters—Mama, Maggie, and Dee—each of whom embodies different attitudes toward heritage, tradition, and modernization. Through these character dynamics, Walker presents a nuanced commentary on the evolving nature of Black identity, particularly in the wake of societal shifts brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. The quilt, in this context, emerges as more than just a family heirloom; it serves as a complex symbol of historical continuity, communal bonds, and the tension between cultural preservation and assimilation.

By analyzing Walker's portrayal of the quilt and its layered significance, this study sheds light on the broader implications of material culture in African American history. The research ultimately concludes by reaffirming Walker's advocacy for the preservation of African American cultural heritage and ancestral values, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a tangible connection to one's roots amidst the pressures of modernization and societal change.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, Everyday Use, African American culture, Cultural heritage, Tradition vs. Modernity, Symbolism, Quil.

واقع متشعب: دراسة في جماليات وقيم الأصالة في قصة ووكر ' الاستخدام اليومي '

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة قصة الكاتبة ألس ووكر " الاستخدام اليومي"، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على استخدامها للبساط المزخرف كاستعارة قوية لتسلط الضوء على أهمية الثقافة الإفريقية الأمريكية خلال حركة الحقوق المدنية في الستينيات. يبدأ البحث بوضع استخدام ووكر الفريد للبساط المزخرف في سياقه المجازي، مع مقارنته في أعمال كتاب آخرين. ثم يتعمق في التفسيرات الأكاديمية الرئيسية، محللاً وجهات النظر النقدية المختلفة التي ساهمت في تشكيل فهم القصة.

## *A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

يمثل أحد الجوانب الرئيسية في الدراسة تحليل وجهات النظر المتباينة للشخصيات الرئيسية—الأم، ماجي، ودي—حيث يجسد كل منهم مواقف مختلفة تجاه التراث، والتقاليد، والحدائق. ومن خلال سلوكيات هذه الشخصيات، تقدم ووكر تعليقاً دقيقاً على الطبيعة المتطورة لهوية اصحاب البشرة السوداء، لا سيما في أعقاب التحولات المجتمعية التي أحدثتها حركة الحقوق المدنية. في هذا السياق، يظهر البساط المزخرف كأكثر من مجرد إرث عائلي؛ فهو يمثل رمزاً معقداً للاستمرارية التاريخية، والروابط المجتمعية، والتوتر بين الحفاظ على الثقافة والاندماج.

ومن خلال تحليل تصوير ووكر للبساط المزخرف ودلالاتها العميقة، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الأبعاد الأوسع للثقافة المادية في التاريخ الإفريقي الأمريكي. ويخلص البحث في النهاية إلى تأكيد دعوة ووكر للحفاظ على التراث الثقافي الإفريقي الأمريكي والقيم المتوارثة، مشدداً على أهمية الحفاظ على ارتباط ملموس بالجذور في ظل ضغوط التحديث والتغيير. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** أليس ووكر، الاستخدام اليومي، الثقافة الأمريكية الأفريقية، التراث الثقافي، التقليد مقابل الحداثة، الرمزية، البساط المزخرف.

### **Introduction**

Since its 1973 debut, Alice Walker's "Everyday use" has become a regular in short story anthologies. This enduring popularity stems from its unflinching exploration of the realities of African American life, woven into an acentric theme. The story transcends a mere narrative, to become a rich tapestry where quilting serves as a central metaphor. As Showalter (1991) aptly observes, it embodies the "central metaphor of American cultural identity" (198). The stitched squares of the quilt bridge the past and present, unifying the African American community with their ancestors through the enduring creativity of its women.

While numerous writers, including Jennifer Chiaverini, Aliske Webb, and Emilie Richards, have explored the significance of quilts in African American life, Walker's approach sets her apart. She elevates the quilt above utilitarianism or decoration. Instead, it becomes a potent symbol, imbued with a "traditional aesthetic value" that resonates deeply within the African American experience. (Torsney & Elsley, 1994:7).

A central question arises when one examining Walker's "Everyday use" and her treatment of the quilt: Does the quilt give the story special significance, or vice versa? Alternatively, is the intense critical focus on the quilt a reflection of its inherent importance in African American life? This research paper delves into these questions by analyzing how Walker challenges the modernizing forces of her time, which threatened the cultural fabric of her community.

### **Literature review**

While scholars have meticulously examined "Everyday use" through cultural, traditional, and economic lenses, a close reading reveals other perspectives woven into the narrative's very foundation. For instance, Parini's (2003) analysis, while insightful regarding cultural discrepancies, particularly those related to racism, offers only a cursory examination of the contrasting viewpoints between Dee, Maggie, and Mama. He compares how Mama points herself and the world differently for each person, but this analysis remains limited in scope (405). Similarly, Mailloux's (1984) formalist approach, which explores irony, paradox, and ambiguity through characters interactions,

## *A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

provides valuable insights but overlooks to address the deeper significance of the quilt (133). Wright (1998), in her psychoanalytic reading, delves into the characters' psychological complexities, particularly Mama's, through a Freudian lens (33). However, this focus risks neglecting the broader cultural context embodied by the quilt. These existing critiques are valuable, but the undeniable importance of the quilt and its connection to African American culture threatens to overshadow other potential interpretations and character complexities within the story's rich narrative.

Transcending mere aesthetics, Alice Walker's quilt becomes a powerful artifact. Its threads weave together the past and present of African American culture and particularly resonates with women writers who see it as a "doubled emblem of creativity and salvation" (Washington, 1991:19). Washington (1991) aptly observes that the 'writing of fiction is done under the shadow of men, and the quilt's metaphorical world offers women a path to escape that shadow' (19). It becomes a fertile ground for their own creative voices to flourish, a space distinct from the male-dominated literary landscape. Through this potent symbol, Walker expresses her own critical perspective on the challenges faced by African Americans and establishes a foundation for women's literary agency.

Whereas some critics, like Hedges (1991), argue that quilting is merely a tradition passed down through generations, devoid of inherent creative potential for women (339). Walker presents a contrasting viewpoint. In her story, the tension surrounding traditional items in her house underscores the clash between Dee's desire to discard the past and Mama's reverence for cultural touchstones. Dee marginalizes these items as impractical, failing to recognize their deeper significance as symbols of a shared heritage. Therefore, this paper will attempt to delve into the contrasting perspectives embodied by different characters in "Everyday use", revealing their polarized views on sociocultural issues that faced the African American community in the 1960s.

### **The Allure of Freedom and the Weight of Tradition**

This story originated during the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement, a period when Black Americans fiercely demanded their rightful place within American society. The burgeoning Black Power movement served as a potent symbol of this growing self-assertion. From the outset, the story establishes its setting with vivid imagery. Mama, the narrator, waxes lyrical about the idyllic beauty of the rural South, a realm where nature reigns supreme with its "trees, sands with breezes that never come inside the house." (Walker, 2007: 3010). However, a closer examination of the opening paragraph reveals a subtle conflict brewing within Mama's mind. She seems torn between the familiar comfort of her home and the yearning for a space that offers a greater sense of freedom.

Mama's yearning for liberation finds expression in a poignant dream. Here, she envisions herself transformed alongside her daughter. This dream becomes, in essence, an act of emancipation for Mama and a fervent escape from the cultural and societal constraints of her era. She desires to be "a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an unlocked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights". (Walker, 2007: 3011). These yearnings illuminate the internal conflict that consumes Mama. She grapples with the desire to emulate her daughter's freedom while remaining tethered to the familiar confines of her home. This longing for a more liberated life stands in stark contrast to Mama's reality, a world from which she cannot readily sever ties. Unlike Dee, her daughter who readily strides away from home and family in pursuit of a new reality, Mama's freedom exists solely within the ethereal realm of dreams.

*A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in  
Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

Dee's life trajectory stands in opposition to that of her mother's and sister's, Maggie. Unlike Dee, who readily cut ties with her social and cultural environment, Mama and Maggie remain firmly rooted in it. This thematic thread is woven into the narrative from the very beginning, as Mama explicitly compares Maggie and Dee. This contrast continues to unfold until Dee's arrival at the family home. Maggie's introverted nature sharply juxtaposes Dee's extroverted personality, since the latter is a woman for whom "hesitation was no part of her nature." (Walker, 2007: 3011). Through her masterful character portrayals, Walker skillfully illuminates the polarized world inhabited by these three individuals. Their contrasting perspectives highlight the cultural tensions simmering in their shared context.

Walker's depiction of Mama's dream underscores the complex web of emotions swirling within her. The dream embodies her yearning for liberation from the confines of her traditional way of life. It also hints at a veiled admiration for Dee's seemingly unfettered existence. However, this yearning for freedom is laced with a subtle contradiction. Mama recognizes that severing her connection to her cultural roots, as Dee has done, might leave her feeling adrift and unable to fully savor the essence of her heritage. This internal conflict is further emphasized by Mama's act of "waiting for Dee." (Walker, 2007: 3010). The embodiment of modern womanhood who has turned her back on her family's history. Dee's arrival leaves Maggie, Mama's other daughter, in a state of dejection – "chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle." (Walker, 2007: 3011). While their home may be physically ravaged by fire, Mama remains tethered to her cultural heritage. Unlike Dee, who embraces a new identity by breaking ties with her family and heritage, Mama cherishes the traditions that nurtured her growth, even as she grapples with the allure of a freer existence.

Dee's return to the family home, however, proves to be a temporary one. Her desire to "tear it down." (Walker, 2007: 3012). signifies a deep-seated aversion of being connected to her roots. Unlike Mama, whose aspirations for freedom find expression only in dreams, Dee actively seeks to dismantle the past. This distinction further emphasizes the contrast between Dee and her introverted sister, Maggie, who possesses a more traditional, unchanging persona. Mama describes Dee as an unwavering spirit, "determined to stare down any disaster" and "would always look anyone in the eye." (Walker, 2007:3011). Walker's own involvement in the Civil Rights Movement likely informs her portrayal of Dee. By highlighting Dee's strength and self-assuredness, Walker might be suggesting the potential for Black people to claim their rightful place in society and achieve equality with their white counterparts.

However, Mama's perspective may also suggest that Dee's return is fraught with internal conflict. Despite being back in the physical space of the family home (albeit a new one after the fire), Dee seems to harbor doubts and discomfort. Her aspirations lie in a modern lifestyle and a more contemporary dwelling. Mama anticipates that Dee might feel a sense of shame when she introduces her friends to this environment, a stark contrast to the life she aspires to lead. This highlights the tension between Dee's desire for upward mobility and her deep-seated connection to her roots. While Dee may have physically returned to the family home, her heart and mind remain elsewhere. Her discomfort and shame suggest a lingering sense of guilt or regret about leaving her family and community behind. This internal conflict further underscores the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges faced by African Americans in navigating the changing landscape of American society. Dee's struggle to reconcile her desire for a modern lifestyle with her cultural heritage reflects the broader societal pressures faced by many Black people during the Civil Rights Movement.

*A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in  
Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

Dee's sense of shame regarding her family and home may stem from a personal experience Alice Walker shared about her own sister, Molly. The poem "For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties" (Walker, 1973) offers a poignant glimpse into their relationship.

For my sister Molly who in the fifties  
Knew Hamlet well and read into the night  
And coached me in my songs of Africa  
A continent I never knew  
But learned to love  
Because 'they' said she could carry  
A tune  
And spoke in accents never heard  
in Eatonton.  
Who read from Prose and Poetry  
And loved to read 'Sam McGee from Tennessee'  
On nights the fire was burning low  
And Christmas wrapped in angel hair  
And I for one prayed for snow

The poem paints a picture of Molly as an intellectual and artistic soul, Molly's love for learning and exposure to different cultures stands in sharp opposition to the rural environment Walker describes. Yet, through Molly's guidance, Walker develops a love for a continent she has never seen. This shared connection highlights the power of education and cultural exploration. Walker, in an interview, recounted a painful experience with Molly, who left for educational pursuits and returned home a changed person:

It was- at first- like having Christmas with us all during her vacation. She loved to read and tell stories. She taught me African songs and dances: she cooked fanciful dishes that looked like anything but plain old sharecropper food. I loved her so much it came as a great shock – and a shock I don't expect to recover from-to learn that she was ashamed of us. We were so poor, dusty and sunburnt. We talked wrong. We didn't know how to dress, or use the right eating utensils. And so, she drifted away and I did not understand it. (Christian: 1994,79)

Walker's poignant depiction of Molly's homecoming offers a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between cultural identity and personal aspirations. Initially, the reunion is a joyous celebration of shared experiences and the enduring bonds of friendship. However, a subtle undercurrent of disillusionment emerges as Walker discovers Molly's newfound shame in her family's background. Dee's similar discomfort with her own roots suggests a shared sense of inadequacy that fuels their aspirations for a modern life. Both characters seem driven by a desire



## *A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

to escape the limitations imposed by their rural upbringing and embrace a more cosmopolitan identity. Yet, this pursuit of a different life is fraught with internal conflict, as evidenced by Molly's shame and Dee's conflicted feelings about her family home.

### **The Dichotomy of Heritage and Identity**

Walker's exploration of these themes is enhanced by her use of vivid imagery and symbolism. The quilt, symbolic of a tangible connection to the past, represents the enduring power of tradition and the challenges of embracing modernity. Through the contrasting perspectives of Dee and Maggie, Walker offers a thought-provoking commentary on the complexities of cultural identity and the enduring influence of family and community

A clear dichotomy exists in Mama's perception of Dee's response. Mama anticipates Dee's contempt for the house, a sentiment that ultimately proven unfounded. This discord continues when Mama's eyes are initially jarred by the vibrancy of Dee's dress, yet a deeper appreciation for her daughter's appearance and adornments takes root. It seems Mama has misjudged Dee's perspective on their shared history and the world she shares with her daughter, Maggie.

Dee's reaction when she arrives clearly shows her disconnection from the family home. She focuses more on the house's appearance than its emotional significance, which reflects her attempt to create a new identity separate from her past. By viewing the house through her own sense of style, Dee tries to tell a story that ignores her personal connection to the space. Her actions, like taking pictures of the house without including herself, show that she is deliberately distancing herself from the family ties that modeled her character.

Upon her return, Dee's desire to establish boundaries between herself and the house reflects her yearning for a world separate from the lives of her mother and sister. This yearning aligns with Baker's (1985) observation that Dee maintains a "fashionably aesthetic distance from southern expediencies" (708). By framing her experience in this way, Dee asserts her independence and rejects the traditional values associated with her upbringing. This reveals the complex interplay between cultural identity and personal aspirations. Dee's struggle to reconcile her desire for a modern lifestyle with her cultural heritage highlights the challenges faced by individuals who seek to break free from the constraints of their past

Walker's "Everyday use" paints a poignant portrait of a cultural chasm dividing a family. Bakers' (1985), in their analysis posit the existence of two distinct aesthetic worlds. Dee, the returning daughter, embodies a superficial aesthetic bereft of true value. Her focus lies solely on outward appearances, exemplified by an admiration for the house's "aesthetic qualities" devoid of its deeper emotional significance (710).

This polarization extends beyond the characters themselves. Mama exemplifies a subtle yet profound struggle between these aesthetics. Initially startled by Dee's vibrant attire, Mama's perception undergoes a subtle shift, revealing a latent appreciation for her daughter's aesthetic choices. This internal conflict mirrors the broader tension between tradition and modernity that permeates the story. Mama's initial reaction, rooted in her traditional values, is gradually tempered by a recognition of the changing landscape of society and the need for individuals to embrace new perspectives.

By exploring this internal conflict within Mama, Walker offers a nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by individuals who are caught between the pull of tradition and the allure of

## *A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

modernity. This exploration adds depth and complexity to the story, highlighting the universal nature of these struggles.

Dee's actions starkly illuminate the chasm between her and her ancestral roots. Upon her return, she seems determined to cast off the cultural fabric that had once enveloped her. Her detachment, manifested in photographs of the house with no sign of her own presence, is a deliberate repudiation of her past. In contrast, Mama and Maggie embody a genuine aesthetic sensibility, deeply intertwined with their shared history and cultural heritage. Their profound appreciation for the quilts, imbued with tales and memories, stands in opposition to Dee's superficiality, Andrew (1993) points out:

This daughter, Dee, has come back to visit her mother and her sister, but now Dee represents a culture quite different from what she left behind when she went to college. Her Polaroid and the automobile in which she has returned are distinctly different from what her mother and sister Maggie have as their conveniences and luxuries- a cool spot in the yard, some quilts, some snuff (55).

### **Dee's Repudiation of Her Roots**

Dee's repudiation of her family's cultural heritage culminates in her name change. By discarding her former identity and assuming the African moniker Wangero, she symbolically declares the demise of the "old" Dee and her severance from the familial legacy. Mama, bewildered by this metamorphosis, endeavors to anchor Dee in their shared history by invoking the ancestral lineage connected to the name "Dee." Yet, Dee's determination remains resolute. This episode further accentuates the polarization within Dee. She simultaneously craves a connection to her heritage, yet actively works to create a world distinct from her family. Dee's insistence on the name change becomes a symbolic act, a way of drawing a line between her past and present.

Mama's yearning to understand Dee's motivations is palpable in her introspection, as she yearns to ascertain the catalyst for Dee's transformation. Yet, Dee remains impervious to any allusion to their ancestral heritage. Ultimately, Mama gives in to Dee and concedes with a resigned, "if that's what you want to call you." (Walker, 2007:3013). This unassuming phrase underscores the widening chasm between mother and daughter. It is noteworthy that during the 1960s, a prevailing trend among African American community members was the adoption of new names:

Beginning in the 1960s some African American adopted African names to replace their given names. The names chosen reflected either an African pattern or a Muslim one, or both. The phenomenon became widespread, and various public figures adopted such names. Among them were major athletes like Muhammed Ali, who began his career as Cassius Clay, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who was Lew Alcindor when he played college basketball in the sixties. (Wilfred :2011, 351).

The weight of history hangs heavy on names within the African American community, as Walker portrays in "Everyday use." These names are inextricably linked to a legacy of humiliation and oppression, a constant reminder of past struggles. Dee's arrival with a new name, a cast-off relic of the past, signifies a yearning to cut ties with this burden. Her Muslim companion, whose greetings leave Mama disoriented, furthers the desire for a new identity. Their presence becomes a symbol of the lengths some African Americans go to escape the shackles of a restrictive history.

*A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in  
Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

This theme extends beyond Dee. Her friend, despite living near Dee's family farm, rejects the traditional livelihood of "farming and raising cattle." His blunt statement – "accepting some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style" (Walker, 2007:3014)– underscores the fragmentation of cultural identity within the community. Walker masterfully illustrates the corrosive influence of oppression, forcing African Americans to abandon their roots and seek a new life, even by erasing the names that weave the fabric of their past.

Dee's arrival at the family home is marked by a curious detachment. Armed with a Polaroid camera, she meticulously takes photographs of the house, her family, and even "a cow nibbling around the edge of the yard." (Walker:2007,3014). This act foreshadows her desire for distance. She sheds her old name and adopts a new one like a foreign garment, a symbolic act of severing ties with her family's culture. This distance manifests itself in the abstract frames of her photographs – she captures the scene but deliberately excludes herself.

Dee's longing for a nexus to her ancestral heritage comes hand in hand with her inclination towards disassociation. She reveres the artifacts of her family's culture, seeking a connection through aesthetic appreciation rather than active engagement. Certain critics, such as Bakers, denounce Dee as a cultural maverick for repudiating her origins. Nevertheless, Dee's trajectory is more multifaceted. Her mother, with a hint of pride, acknowledges Dee's metamorphosis into a self-fashioned woman, one who has defied the very forces that once subjugated her heritage (Bakers:1985,711)

Notwithstanding the widening chasm, Dee endeavors to mend the rift through cultural artifacts from her past. The quilt, an object once spurned, now possesses an enigmatic allure. It emerges as a potential conduit to her family's lineage, a tenuous thread that could reintegrate her with the culture she both cherishes and eschews. Dee's quest for a nexus with her family's heritage assumes a peculiar guise. She seeks to erect a metaphorical bridge by associating herself with objects imbued with profound cultural and aesthetic significance for African Americans. This polarization within Dee becomes evident in her concurrent actions.

Dee harbors a dual yearning. On the one hand, she aspires to extol her ancestral heritage. She scrutinizes the house's artifacts with meticulous attention, particularly those fashioned by her forebears and employed by her kin. Dee even invites the enigmatic barber, Hakim to authenticate their significance. Her gaze lingers upon the antiquated bench and churn and an ardent desire for possession simmers beneath the surface. This yearning to possess these objects mirrors a profound longing for connection.

Dee's actions, however, betray an insidious inclination towards disassociation. The meticulously framed photographs of the house, her name change, and her aversion to her family's home all allude to a yearning to sever herself from her origins. It seems that Dee aspires to the aesthetic gratification of her culture without the encumbrance of its quotidian realities. This dichotomy reaches its zenith when Dee endeavors to claim the quilt, a cherished artifact that encapsulates the family's shared lineage.

On the other hand, Mama and Maggie perceive these artifacts not as mere museum specimens, but as indispensable components of their quotidian existence, imbued with profound cultural significance and cherished memories. This disparity becomes manifest at the narrative's climax, where Dee's fervent desire for the quilt clashes with her family's more deeply rooted connection to it.



## **The Quilt as a Symbol of Cultural Heritage**

In African American culture, the quilt transcends the realm of mere utility, transforming into a vibrant fabric woven with memory and narrative. It embodies the profound connection between its maker and its user, serving as a tangible heirloom passed down through generations. Its significance extends far beyond mere feminine creativity, for it is a powerful symbol that resonates with the very essence of a community's heritage. Unlike opulent objects crafted for display or commerce, the quilt embodies the intrinsic, unpretentious beauty that lies at the heart of African American cultural expression.

As Torsney-Elsley (1994) aptly observe "the contrasting approaches of Dee and Maggie towards this potent symbol reveal a fascinating tension." (3). Dee, now known as Wangero, craves the quilt as a tangible representation of her past, yearning to transform it into a museum item, a static display divorced from lived experience. Maggie, on the other hand, cherishes it and its practical purpose, an essential thread woven into the fabric of their daily lives.

Dee's newfound interest in the quilt, an object previously cast aside, can be interpreted as a yearning to reconnect with her roots. However, her methods are misguided. She attempts to exert a possessive hold on the quilt, a symbol of a shared past, with a forceful approach that alienates her own mother. Mama's swift and decisive action – snatching the quilt and placing it in Maggie's lap – speaks volumes. It underscores the critical importance of entrusting cultural treasures to those who understand their inherent meaning, those who value the stories they hold more than mere aesthetics.

Through Mama's eyes, Dee transforms into an outsider and interloper. Her immersion in a new culture has reconfigured her into a modern woman who prioritizes an abstract, superficial appreciation for objects. Blinded by this perspective, she fails to grasp the deeper cultural significance that gives the quilt its profound meaning. The quilt, a potent symbol of shared history and unwavering resilience, becomes a battleground, exposing the chasm that separates Dee's superficial understanding from the genuine connection that Mama and Maggie share with their heritage:

In everyday use Walker poses problems of heritages in response to the black power movements of the 1960s in which she grew up, especially the kind of cultural nationalism that demanded imitation of features of the African past. Walker critiques the short-sightedness of radicals who would have seen the narrator, the mother as what Barbara Christian calls 'that supposedly backward Southern ancestor the cultural nationalists of the North probably visited during the summers of their youth and probably considered behind the time (Guerin-Labor-Morgan eds: 2011,295)

A simmering discord erupts between Mama and Dee, a clash over the fate of heirloom quilts that resonate with past generations. Dee, captivated by their superficial beauty, envisions them as static museum specimens, entombed in time and severed from the vibrant tapestry of history which they embody. These quilts, however, are more than mere objects; they are symbols of the African American heritage, interwoven with the stories, struggles, and triumphs of countless women who have made them for centuries. Mama, however, perceives them as a living testament, a vibrant patchwork woven with the threads of legacy. The quilts, nestled in a cherished trunk at the foot of Mama's bed, are not cast aside but rather treated as sacred relics. Unlike mere baubles of commerce, they represent an unbroken chain linking women across time. Dee's discovery of the quilts does not signify neglect but rather underscores their precious nature, carefully preserved

## *A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

for a specific purpose. These are not mere wall decorations; they are a dowry promised to Maggie, a symbol of continuity and the promise of future creation.

Dee's dismissive proclamation that Maggie "can't appreciate these quilts!" (Walker:2007,3015) exposes a fundamental abyss. Dee prioritizes fleeting aesthetics over enduring utility, blind to the quilts' deeper narrative. In contrast, Mama's assured rejoinder, "I reckon she would," (Walker:2007,3015) testifies eloquently to her unwavering faith in Maggie. Not only can Maggie utilize the quilts, but she possesses the knowledge to carry forward the tradition of their creation. Maggie's own quilting skills ensure the African tradition stitched into the fabric will persist despite its daily use. Herein lies the stark contrast between Dee and Maggie: one values superficial beauty, the other comprehends the rich cultural narrative embedded within the very threads of the quilts.

Mama's instinctive reaction - snatching the quilts and placing them in Maggie's lap - transcends a mere action; it becomes a powerful metaphor. It signifies the act of entrusting cultural treasures to the rightful custodian, someone who values the rich history and traditions woven into the quilts, rather than just their aesthetic appeal. Hanging them on a wall, as Dee desires, is not inherently problematic; museums already serve that purpose. However, the crucial distinction lies in the destination of these heirlooms - ensuring they are placed in the hands of those who value their cultural significance beyond mere display or economic gain. The final resting place matters; "hugged Maggie... then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap." (Walker:2007,3015).

### **Conclusion**

Alice Walker's "Everyday use" remains a seminal work in American literature, its enduring relevance rooted in its nuanced exploration of cultural identity, heritage, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. At its core, the story interrogates the significance of the quilt as both a literal and metaphorical artifact, weaving together the struggles of African American women to preserve their legacy amidst societal upheaval. The quilt transcends its material form, embodying the cultural significance of a shared history while serving as a battleground for conflicting ideologies. Walker's narrative challenges superficial engagements with culture, critiquing the commodification of heritage in favor of an authentic, lived connection to the past. The polarization between Dee's modernized worldview and Mama and Maggie's rootedness in tradition underscores the broader cultural fissures of the Civil Rights era. Dee's desire to aestheticize the quilt—to hang it as a museum relic—reflects a detachment from the communal memory it represents. In contrast, Maggie's quiet stewardship of the quilts, with their stitched squares of ancestral labor, epitomizes Walker's vision of cultural continuity. Mama's decisive act of reclaiming the quilts for Maggie crystallizes the story's central argument: heritage is not static but thrives through active preservation and everyday practice. Walker's critique extends beyond individual characters to address the dangers of cultural nationalism, which often prioritizes symbolic gestures over substantive engagement. By contrasting Dee's performative embrace of African identity (symbolized by her name change) with Mama's steadfast guardianship of familial legacy, Walker highlights the necessity of grounding identity in lived experience rather than abstract ideals. The quilt, as Showalter (1991) notes, becomes a "central metaphor of American cultural identity" (198) bridging generations and affirming the resilience of African American women's creativity. Ultimately, "Everyday use" offers a profound meditation on the interplay between object and narrative. The quilt's significance is both inherent and amplified by Walker's storytelling, reflecting its deep-rooted importance in African American life. The story's resolution—Mama entrusting the quilts to Maggie—serves as a testament to the enduring power of tradition when nurtured by those who understand its value. Walker's work remains a vital

*A Bifurcated Reality: Aesthetics and Authenticity in  
Alice Walker's "Everyday use"*

contribution to discussions of cultural preservation, urging readers to recognize that true heritage lies not in display but in the hands that craft, mend, and carry it forward.

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