Everyday Use

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALICE WALKER

Alice Walker was born as the youngest of eight children, in Eatonon, Georgia, where her parents worked as sharecroppers. As a child, Walker suffered from an eye injury after a BB gun accident that left her blind in one eye. Walker enrolled in Spelman College in 1961 and later transferred to Sarah Lawrence College, where she graduated in 1965. Walker published her most well known work, *The Color Purple*, in 1982, receiving the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for the novel. Walker is an advocate for gender and racial equality. She has written over 30 novels, non-fiction books, and collections of short stories and poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Walker published *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and in the thick of the Women's Rights Movement of the 1970s. She participated actively in both, organizing and protesting alongside activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gloria Steinem. Walker coined the term "womanism" to refer to a kind of feminism that specifically addresses the struggles of African-American women. Her writing reflects the tenants of the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements, and her work itself was a kind of activism, as she helped create space for women of color in the arts.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Everyday Use" was written during a time when the literary canon was quickly expanding to accept many writers previously shut out from it—in particular writers of color and women writers. Walker's larger body of work, including her Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* and the rest of the collection *Love and Trouble* (in which "Everyday Use" was published), reflect a commitment to telling the stories of women of color. Walker's major influences include many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, an African-American art movement in the 1920s and 1930s, such as novelist Nella Larsen and author Jean Toomer. Walker's largest influence, however, is Harlem Renaissance novelist Zora Neale Hurston, whose work she helped bring to national attention.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Everyday Use
- **When Published:** 1973, as a part of the collection *In Love and Trouble*
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary African American Literature
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** the Deep South
- **Climax:** The argument over family quilts
- **Antagonist:** Dee, partly
- **Point of View:** First person narrative from Mama's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Zora Neale Hurston. Alice Walker is credited with renewing literary interest in Zora Neale Hurston, one of her major influences. Walker was responsible for placing a headstone on Hurston's previously unmarked grave. It reads: "A Genius of the South."

Color Purple on the Silver Screen. Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* was made into a 1985 film directed by Steven Spielberg, as well as a Broadway musical.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Everyday Use," Mama, the story's first person narrator, describes her relationship to her daughter Dee as Dee, an educated young African-American woman, returns to visit her childhood **house** in the Deep South. The story begins as Mama and Maggie, Dee's sister and Mama's younger daughter, prepare for the visit. Maggie changes her clothes as Mama fantasizes about reconciling with her daughter on a television show hosted by someone like Johnny Carson. Mama then dismisses her fantasy as unrealistic, because she believes she is not the kind of person who would appear on such a show.

As she waits for Dee, Mama looks around the yard and at Maggie, triggering memories of Dee's troubled childhood in their house—her anger towards her family and their poverty, her hunger for higher quality clothes and an education, her charisma, assertiveness, and her beauty. Mama thinks about how Dee's attitude towards them changed as she became educated thanks to money from Mama and the Church, turning her from hateful to hurtfully condescending. As she remembers Dee as a child, Mama contrasts her with Maggie—a diffident, kind, homely young woman with a scar on her face from the house fire. Mama recounts the traumatizing fire, which burnt down their home, and forced them to build a new one, exactly like it, where they now live.

At last Dee and her partner, Hakim-a-Barber, arrive at the house. Dee is dressed in a beautiful, colorful, floor-length dress in African style. She introduces herself as "Wangero," not as

Dee, stating that she changed her name so she would not be named after her "oppressors." Mama is originally skeptical of both these choices, but decides that she likes the dress. Mama reminds Dee that she is, in fact, named after her aunt Dicie, but agrees to call Dee by her chosen name.

Dee takes pictures of her family with their house. She and Hakim-a-Barber eat with Mama and Maggie, and while Hakim-a-Barber is unenthusiastic about the family's fare, Dee enjoys the collard greens and pork with relish. Dee, who, as Mama mentioned, once disdained the family's possessions, now unexpectedly covets them. She admires the worn stools, coos over her grandmother's butter dish, and demands to be given the top of the family's butter churn to use as decoration in her house. Mama acquiesces, and gives Dee the churn.

After dinner, Dee insists on taking home her grandmother's **quilts** as well, to hang on her walls. Mama, however, had planned on giving the quilts to Maggie. When Mama refuses, saying that she promised them to Maggie, Dee becomes angry. She insists that Maggie cannot appreciate the quilts, and will wear them out with "everyday use." When Mama brushes Dee's anger off, saying that Maggie can simply make new quilts since she knows how to sew, Dee insists that the quilts are "priceless" and that Mama does not "understand" her heritage. Still, Mama refuses to give Dee the quilts, and dumps them on Maggie's lap. The story ends with Dee's departure, leaving Mama and Maggie alone together in the house.

CHARACTERS

Mama – The narrator of the story, Mama is an African-American woman living in the Deep South. She is a hard-working, practical person with simple tastes, and she lives with her younger daughter, Maggie, in their small **house**. Mama's relationship with her older daughter, Dee, is strained. The story begins with Mama preparing for Dee's impending visit. When Dee arrives, Mama submits to many of Dee's demands, calling her by a different name and giving her family possessions. At the story's conclusion, however, Mama stands up for herself and Maggie against Dee, refusing to give her the family **quilts**, and by extension asserting the validity and worth of their lifestyle.

Dee – Dee, a young, well-educated, and self-confident African-American woman, is Mama's daughter and Maggie's sister. The story centers around Dee's visit with her family at her childhood home in the Deep South. As a child, Dee was angry, bitter, and resentful towards her family and their poverty. When Dee returns to the family's **house**, however, her attitude towards the family's lifestyle has completely flipped. She covets the family's heirlooms, but fails to appreciate them as part of her family's daily life. Ultimately, Mama refuses to give Dee her grandmother's **quilts**, opting instead to give them to Maggie.

Maggie – Maggie, Mama's younger daughter and Dee's sister, is a timid, nervous, kind-hearted young woman. Compared to Dee, she is less intelligent and less beautiful, and has not received the education her sister has. Maggie suffers from a burn scar on her face, the result of a traumatic **house** fire several years before. Unlike her sister, Maggie has a close relationship with her mother. At the beginning of the story, Maggie seems anxious about Dee's visit, asking Mama how her clothes suit her. When Dee insists on taking the family **quilts**, Mama decides to give them to Maggie instead, because she thinks Maggie will appreciate them better.

Hakim-a-barber – Hakim-a-barber is Dee's partner, whom Dee brings to Mama and Maggie's **house** with her. When they arrive at the house, he greets the family by saying "Asalamalakim," and so Mama mockingly uses this to refer to him as "Asalamakim" throughout the rest of the story. Walker portrays Hakim-a-barber as uptight and over-intellectualizing, unable to connect to Dee's family.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HERITAGE AND THE EVERYDAY

Heritage, and its relationship to daily life, is the central question that Walker explores in "Everyday Use." Through the eyes of Mama, and through the contrasting characters of Dee and Maggie, Walker offers two varying views of what family history, the past, and "heritage" really mean.

In Dee's view, heritage is a kind of dead past, distanced from the present through nostalgia and aestheticization (which means reducing something to a symbol or piece of art, and so removing other meanings and uses from it). Dee rejects the parts of her heritage that belong to the immediate past or, even, are still present in the family's everyday life. Because of this, she disdains her sister and mother's life on the farm, their continued use of family heirlooms, and their ancestral **house**. Dee shows her anger towards this immediate past in her happiness when their house burned, her readiness to leave her home behind when she went to college, and her lack of interest in learning family skills like sewing. Instead of this immediate heritage, Dee idealizes an African culture that she only shallowly understands, one that predates her family's history in the United States and the history of slavery. She chooses that culture as the basis for her "heritage," calling herself by the African name "Wangero" and altering her style of dress. When

Dee returns to her home as an adult, she attempts to make her immediate past as distant and imaginary as this African one. Dee photographs her family and their house, turning them into art-objects, and insists on taking home the family's heirlooms—a hand-carved and well used butter churn, her grandmother's **quilts**—to display as decorations and artifacts in her house. She doesn't want to actually live in the house with her family or use the objects, only idealize them as memorabilia—hollow signs of heritage that have no connection with her real life.

Overall, Walker seems to criticize this imagined, distant view of heritage. She depicts Dee's quaint, aestheticized vision of her family and their still-living customs as cold, elitist, and hurtful. Mama resents Dee for her attempts to put their lifestyle firmly in the past, and Dee's meanness in this respect can be seen in the way she laughs at and looks down on Maggie for her appreciation of the family history. Moreover, Walker suggests that Dee's view of heritage is utterly misguided and uninformed. For instance, Dee believes that she is named after white "oppressors," when in fact she is named after her beloved Aunt Dicie.

Mama and Maggie, on the other hand, exemplify the alternative view of heritage that Walker proposes— one in which heritage is a part of everyday life, fluid and constantly being added to and changed. Mama and Maggie have no higher education or knowledge of Africa, but they do appreciate their more immediate roots: their house, their family heirlooms, their traditions. The quilts, which Dee wants to display as art, Maggie would put to "everyday use," using them as blankets, putting them on beds—the way they were intended to be used. Maggie, unlike Dee, also learned to sew from her grandmother, and so can add to the family collection, pass on her skills, and keep the tradition alive.

In refusing to give the quilts to Dee and instead giving them to Maggie, Mama rejects Dee's idealized view of heritage and instead embraces a relationship to heritage that is dynamic and continually developing. Though perhaps Mama and Maggie's view of heritage could also be enriched by education and knowledge of their African roots, the fact that they don't distance themselves from their family history makes their understanding of heritage more real and significant than Dee's. As a result, Dee's accusation that Mama does not "understand" their heritage rings as bitterly ironic, since Walker has made it clear that Dee is the one out of touch with her family's way of life.

EDUCATION

Through Dee, "Everyday Use" explores how education affects the lives of people who come from uneducated communities, considering the benefits of an education as well as the tradeoffs.

Alice Walker clearly believes that education can be, in certain ways, helpful to individuals. For one, education can empower people financially and therefore materially. Dee's education rewards her with the "nice things" she has desired since she was a child: gold earrings, a camera, sunglasses. The benefits of education also extend beyond just material ones: education helps Dee transform socially and spiritually. For example, Dee's education helps her overcome her resentment towards her past and family. Mama credits Dee's education with the change in her attitude toward Maggie, whom she previously hated. Not only does Dee's education heal some of her personal relationships, but it also gives her the ability to challenge social norms. In particular, Mama credits Dee's education with her questioning of and resistance to racism. An example of this is Dee's newfound identity as "Wangero," which she sees as a way of subverting racist history, and is forged through her knowledge and study of African culture.

But despite these clear benefits, Walker's attitude towards education is not uniformly positive. On the contrary, Walker suggests many ways in which Dee's education, and education in general, might be harmful or ineffective in helping other people. While Dee believes that her embrace of her African roots and the African name "Wangero" is a form of resistance to racism, her new-found identity comes across as a self-indulgent, intellectual exercise when contrasted with her family's daily experience of violent, oppressive racism. Dee's personal liberation does little to help elevate her community—her new style of African dress, for example, cannot stop white men from poisoning the neighbor's cows, as Mama notes happened just recently. So while Dee has perhaps empowered herself, her actions have done little to change racist conditions for other African-Americans. (Of course, this is also a commentary on Dee herself as much as education as a whole.)

But not only does Walker suggest that Dee's education might be ineffective in enacting meaningful change, she also implies that Dee's education, in some ways, actively harms her family. Mama describes Dee's attitude towards her family after she becomes educated as a form of violence and oppression in itself. According to Mama, Dee was "forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon [herself and Maggie], sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice…burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know." Through her education, Dee has developed the tools to hurt her family and make them feel inferior to her. Walker even connects Dee's education to the fire that burned down their **house**. When she uses the word "burn," Walker seems to hint that Dee and her education traumatize her mother and sister just like the fire did.

The fact that Dee's education does not help her family, but rather harms them, contradicts the expected cliché that talented individuals inevitably escape poverty and then their success bolsters their community and family. Walker, by inverting this expectation, seems to be writing against it,

implying that educating only select individuals is rarely effective in elevating entire communities.

In contrast to her cynicism towards formal education, Walker presents an alternative system of knowledge: understanding. She clearly evokes the distinction between the two systems during the argument over the quilts, when Dee repeatedly states that her family does not "understand" the value of the quilts, the best way to use them, and their heritage. This assertion is highly ironic, of course, because Dee is clearly the one who cannot grasp what real heritage means. By repeating the word "understand," Walker draws attention to the difference between understanding and formal education. She implies that, while formal education may be more valued in society, it cannot make up for an inability to connect and empathize with others. To Walker, understanding is a system of knowledge that people like Mama can possess, regardless of their level of formal education. She seems to believe that without understanding, even highly educated people will suffer from massive blind spots in their ability to form meaningful, healthy relationships.

OBJECTS, SYMBOLISM, AND WRITING

As Mama narrates "Everyday Use," she uses a multitude of objects and material goods to tell her story. Through Mama and her attention to objects, Walker investigates the meaning of materiality in fiction and explores the various ways they can be used for storytelling.

In the first place, material goods work in "Everyday Use" to stand in for and help describe characters' identities. For example, Mama marks Dee's difference from the rest of her family in part through her desire for "nice things." Mama remarks that Dee has always had her own style, and when Dee returns to the family home, her "loud" clothes reflect her success and assertiveness. When Dee arrives at the **house**, Mama takes in Dee's dress that is "so loud it [hurts] her eyes," her earrings, and her bracelets "making noises." Like her clothing, Dee is charismatic and expressive, sometimes to the point of being abrasive. Mama, on the other hand, represents her humbleness, simplicity, and hardworking disposition through her practical clothing: a flannel nightgown and overalls.

Not only do these material objects allow Walker to describe character, but they also enable her to track how it changes. For example, Dee's changing relationship toward the objects of her childhood marks her changing attitude toward the past. As a child, Dee wanted new things and disdained her family's possessions, but adult Dee admires the objects of her childhood, showing that Dee's orientation towards her home and her heritage has changed.

Indeed, using objects to reflect character is something many authors do. But what sets "Everyday Use" apart is the way that Walker represents characters not only through their possessions, but also through their interaction with and exchange of them. In "Everyday Use," Walker shows two distinct ways that characters orient themselves toward the material world.

The first way, exemplified by Dee, is rigidly symbolic. Dee collects objects for their symbolic meaning and visual beauty, rather than for their utility. For instance, Dee asks her mother to give her the top of a butter churn to use "as a centerpiece for the alcove table" and plans to do "something artistic" with the dasher. For Dee, these objects are valuable as visual symbols of an aestheticized past, not as part of an everyday routine.

In contrast, the other characters interact with objects in a way that is more organic and concerned with practicality and use. Mama, unlike Dee, values the objects in her home for the work they do and how they can be used, and notes how that use affects and enriches their meaning. The churn top is valuable to her not as an art object or a visual representation of the past, but because it is worn from making butter—for its important position in people's everyday lives, and her family members' lives in particular. To Mama, the butter churn and other objects like it have whole systems of intermingling memories and sensations attached to them through their continued use. When Mama interacts with the objects that connect her to her heritage, she is adding to that heritage, rather than simply memorializing it as Dee does.

These two differing views of how objects should best be appreciated clash in the story's primary conflict, a disagreement about the family's heirloom **quilts**. Dee wants to take them away and hang them on the walls of her house as memorabilia, while Mama wants Maggie to keep them because she will use them. When Mama "wins" this debate, Walker seems to be indicating her sympathies with Mama's orientation to objects rather than Dee's.

By juxtaposing the use of objects as exclusively as symbols and the use of objects in a more fluid way, ranging from practical to sensational to memorial, Walker, who has herself been using objects to tell her story, draws attention to the role of objects not only within the plot, but also in writing itself. By taking up objects in writing only as direct symbols, the story seems to ask a question: does a reader, like Dee, miss something essential about the way an object operates in the story? Walker seems to be warning her readers against reducing objects in her stories to simple, direct symbols. Instead, she implies that readers should consider the whole constellation of meanings that objects collect as they are used over and over again throughout the story.

RACISM, RESISTANCE, AND SACRIFICE

Race structures the social and economic conditions of characters' daily lives in "Everyday Use." From the first few paragraphs, Walker makes it clear that

the oppression of African-Americans is built into the society of the Deep South, where Mama and Maggie live. This injustice manifests itself in a multitude of ways, ranging from Mama's inability to look "a strange white man in the eye" to her mentions of racialized violence, like the time when "the white folks" poisoned her neighbor's herd of cattle.

While Mama has a keen way of taking note of the racism she experiences, she also seems unable to combat it, and simply accepts its effects as inevitable. For example, after Mama mentions that she did not go to school after the second grade, she states that "in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now." Mama implies that she, unlike Dee, was not taught to criticize or struggle against her community's racial conditions. Moreover, when Mama mentions encountering racism, she talks about it as a precondition of her story, a part of the structure of her life rather than a changeable content of it. When Mama talks about her neighbor's cows being poisoned, the racist violence of this anecdote is not the point of the story— it is part of the background information. To Mama, racism is an unfortunate reality, a part of the unchangeable structure of her life.

Dee acts as a foil (a character whose qualities contrast with and therefore highlight another character's qualities) to Mama in this respect. Dee, unlike Mama, actively challenges the racial status quo, refusing to accept it as inevitable. Unlike Mama, who cannot even imagine herself "looking a strange white man in the eye," Dee "would always look anyone in the eye." Dee's **gaze** undermines the expectation in her community that African-Americans should behave with deference towards white people. Moreover, Dee attempts to forge a new, African identity for herself as "Wangero," stating that the name "Dee" attaches her to a history of oppression she would rather reject.

But despite Dee's attempts to transcend the racial expectations of her community and time period, racism, and the family's differing ways of reacting to it, still manages to sour the family's bonds, especially Mama and Dee's. Even in Mama's fantasy of reconciliation with Dee at the story's opening, differing attitudes towards race dispel the possibility of reunion. When Mama daydreams about going on the Johnny Carson TV show with Dee, she imagines them hugging and pictures herself "the way [her] daughter would want [her] to be," with a "quick and witty tongue" that Johnny Carson can barely keep up with. This image, however, devolves when Mama thinks "who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye?" Mama's internalized racism and life of hardship makes her unable to be someone Dee would presumably be proud of, and so unable to truly reconcile with Dee. Through this broken fantasy, Walker articulates how racism destroys relationships not only between white people and African-Americans, but also between African-Americans themselves.

The legacy of racism also drives Dee away from not just Mama, but her whole family history. Dee believes that in order to liberate herself from racial injustice, she must also distance herself from the history of slavery and African-American oppression—a history closely tied to her family's story. For example, when Dee rejects her given name for an African one, she says it is because, "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me." Dee believes that she must reject her given name in order reject its history of oppression. Unfortunately, as Mama points out, Dee is actually named after her beloved aunt Dicie. Dee's attempt to reject the past means also rejecting her ancestors who lived in it. Essentially, Dee is forced to choose between rejecting the history of racial oppression and keeping her personal identity and familial connections. Walker uses Dee to exemplify a difficulty that not just she, but African-Americans in general might face: untangling contemporary identity from a history of slavery and racism. "Everyday Use" understands the legacy of racism as difficult to disrupt, in part because this legacy troublingly links African-American identity and history with oppression.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HOUSE

Mama and Maggie's house works in "Everyday Use" to represent both the comfort of their family heritage and the trauma built into that history. The house is beloved by Mama and Maggie, who treasure its resemblance to the house that came before it, a family dwelling passed down through generations. Dee, on the other hand, loathed the old house as a child. But while the house represents a family's history that Mama and Maggie cherish and Dee wants to forget, it also contains a history of trauma. Aside from the family's own history of slavery and oppression, their house's predecessor burned down and scarred Maggie's face, leaving Mama and Maggie to relive this experience whenever they note the house's similarity to the one that came before it. The house, therefore, shows the complexity of navigating a family history that is both full of love and full of pain.

QUILTS

The family's quilts, sewn by Maggie and Dee's grandmother, become the site of the family's struggle over its heritage and the question of how best to engage with that heritage. Dee wants to take the quilts away with her, insisting that they should be hung on the wall and preserved rather than being used. Mama, on the other hand,

wants to give them to Maggie, who actually learned to sew from her grandmother, and who will use the quilts daily. By demanding that the quilts be memorialized and used as decoration, Dee is attempting to place the family history firmly in an aestheticized, and thus deadened, past. Mama and Maggie, on the other hand, wish to continue using the quilts, and so continually engage with and build upon the family's history. When Mama gives the quilts the Maggie, she ensures that the family heritage will stay alive in the manner she prefers. By using the quilts and making her own when they wear out, Maggie will add to the family's legacy, rather than distancing herself from it.

EYE CONTACT / VISION / GAZE

The idea of eye contact, vision, or gaze recurs throughout "Everyday Use," representing the various ways that characters, particularly Dee, interact with or create hierarchies of power. For example, when Mama contrasts her inability to look white men in the eye with Dee's tenacious ability to always return a gaze, eye contact represents Dee's ability to combat and resist oppressive racial norms. Dee uses her gaze also to elevate herself above her family, creating a power dynamic between them. When Dee and Hakim-a-Barber visit, they signal to each other with their eye movements over the family's heads, a conversation that excludes, and therefore disempowers, Dee's mother and sister. While sight represents Dee's resistance to some hierarchies of power, like in her ferocious returning gaze to white men, it also reinforces other ones, like between Dee and her poorer, less educated family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt edition of *In Love and Trouble* published in 2001.

Everyday Use Quotes

❝ Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Dee

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Mama, having just imagined a happy, televised reconciliation between herself and Dee, here dismisses her own hopeful vision. Mama's internalized racism and lack of self-confidence prevent her from making up with her daughter, or becoming someone she thinks her daughter might like or admire. When Mama asks, "who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue?" she implies that something about her nature (rather than, say, her lack of education) prevents her from being witty. Likewise, Mama's fear of white people can be seen in how she talks to white people always with "one foot raised in flight."

Walker uses eye contact to show the intensity of the racial power dynamics at play in the story. Mama does not believe anyone could even "imagine" her looking a white man in the eye, showing that her sense of race and the limitations it imposes cannot even be transcended by the powers of imagination. Even in her wildest dreams, or the wildest dreams of others, Mama cannot look a strange white man in the eye. Mama's sense of race as a limiting factor in her own life is so deeply rooted that it ruins even her fantasies, and prevents her from a real life reconciliation with Dee.

❝ How long ago was it the house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them. And Dee…Why don't you dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated that house so much.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Maggie, Dee

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

Mama, who is reminiscing before Dee arrives for her visit, describes the terrible house fire that burnt down their ancestral home several years ago. The memory of the fire, which Mama brings up several times throughout the story, clearly still terrorizes the family. Mama still "hears" the flames, experiencing a kind of synesthesia (a phenomenon

where one's senses become muddled).

Notably, many of the material things from which Dee derives her sense of self (hair, clothing) were lost to Maggie in that fire, perhaps accounting for Maggie's apathy toward these modes of self-expression. Maggie's eyes reflect the flames as she burns, showing how her gaze, which for Dee is a form of resistance, is undermined by the memory of the fire. Mama and Maggie's skepticism towards Dee's attitude that objects should be preserved might also come, in part, from the fire, where their great material loss was arbitrary and unrelated to whether they used their possessions or not.

Mama's resentment towards Dee becomes evident as she bitterly suggests that Dee, who hated the house, would have liked to "dance around the ashes." Mama shows how the house, while beloved and the center of the family's heritage, is also the site of trauma—both the physical trauma of the fire and the emotional trauma of Dee's hatred for it.

> She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Dee, Maggie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

As Mama describes the various consequences of Dee's transformation, she talks about the experience of Dee reading to her and to Maggie. Although Dee's reading to her family might seem like it would be a loving, bonding activity, Mama's description suggests that it was instead hurtful to herself and to Maggie. Mama describes Dee's reading as "forcing words, lies" and keeping Mama and Maggie "trapped and ignorant underneath her voice," essentially equating the way Dee read to them as a violent, oppressive act. Dee's reading drew her family in only to reject them for their ignorance and inability to understand at her level, and this rejection pains Mama.

Moreover, Dee's reading forced Mama to face her daughter's wish for a different family and a different life, as Dee attempts to put "other folks' habits" and "whole lives upon" her mother and sister. Mama even connects Dee's reading to the deeply traumatic house fire when she says Dee "burned" them with unnecessary information. To Mama, it seems, watching her daughter develop the capacity to resent her life and her family constituted a deep trauma in itself.

> I never had an education myself. After second grade the school closed down. Don't ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Dee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

As Mama contrasts her own education history with the college-educated Dee's, her language suggests some of the functions of education. When Mama says she never had an education as a result of her school's closure, she correlates this lack with her inability to ask questions. As a child, Mama says, "colored asked fewer questions than they do now," implying that their inability to ask questions prevented them from fighting back against the school closing. She also suggests that her inability to question her social, economic, and racial conditions is a result of the time in which she grew up— a time when few African-Americans received an education.

In doing so, Mama suggests the cyclic relationship between oppression and a lack of education. She implies that there is an intimate link between education and the ability to question and criticize the structure of one's life, including racism.

> A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes... Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves to shake the folds of her dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Dee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

When Dee finally arrives at the house, she steps out of the car and Mama takes in her outfit. As Mama evaluates Dee's clothes, she takes note of their lack of practicality ("in this weather," Mama thinks, suggesting that the weather calls for different garb). Mama uses words to describe Dee's clothing that evoke a sense of Dee's style as literally and metaphorically noisy—Dee's dress is "so loud" and her bracelets make "noises," reflecting Dee's own outspokenness. Taking "loud" to literally mean colorful, Dee's dress is so bright that it "hurts" her mother's eyes, and once again Walker ties Dee's self-expression to her mother's pain.

Still, Mama, after an entire paragraph describing her daughter's appearance, decides in the last two words of the last sentence that she "like[s] it." Mama's admiration of her daughter's dress seems to be an active decision, suggesting Mama's desperation that they reconcile. In this quote, Walker shows how material objects can show personality and evoke a personal history that means different things to different people. To Dee, the dress is liberation and self-expression, and to Mama, the dress sorely evokes the difference between herself and her daughter, and affords the possibility of reconciliation.

> She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Dee, Maggie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Dee, having just arrived at Mama and Maggie's house, gets right down to the business of picture taking. But rather than talking pictures of the family interacting, or including herself or Hakim-a-barber in the photos, Dee insists on taking pictures of Mama and Maggie with their house, with Mama sitting and Maggie standing, and with a cow. In doing so, Dee seems to be posing the family as part of the rural landscape they live in, rather than people with dynamic lives. Such a photo, in which Mama is sitting and static, seems to fundamentally misrepresent the life of a hardworking farmer who is constantly working and moving.

The purpose of Dee's photograph, as revealed by her instance of rendering her family as part of a rural landscape, seems not to be to represent the lives of Mama and Maggie, but rather to turn her vision of them into a two-dimensional photograph for display. Dee insists on using Mama and Maggie to represent her vision of their lives, rather than to understand them as they are.

> '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.'

Related Characters: Mama, Dee (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Mama greets Dee as "Dee," Dee corrects her, telling her instead to call her by the African name "Wangero." Dee tries to explain to Mama why she made this choice. As the discussion goes on, Mama responds that Dee is, in fact, named after her female ancestors.

This disagreement shows the difference in Mama and Dee's worldview, and their respective understandings of the relationship between family history and racism. To Dee, resisting racism means erasing the personal and family history intertwined with it, and returning to something that predates it. Mama, however, sees the erasure of that history as a loss of personal identity and connection to family.

When Dee says that Dee is "dead," she is effectively confirming Mama's fears: losing her name allows Dee to cast off the identity that she has always loathed, the identity that connects her to Mama and the rest of the family. But what Dee views as liberation, Mama understands as grief.

> You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was a beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash lived.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Mama examines the dasher while Dee, who intends to use it as a decoration, packs it up to take home. Mama's thoughts as Dee wraps up the dasher reveal the complex way that Mama understands her family's heirlooms. She sees the marks of use from hands moving the dasher, the evidence of physical labor and human interaction. Mama, who is herself a hard worker, understands how the dasher is used, and can picture how others might have used the piece.

When Mama looks at the dasher, she sees not only a decorative object, but a whole system of meaning— the color of the wood evokes memories of her relatives' house, the sinks allow her to picture its use by her ancestors, and the thought of Big Dee perhaps reminds of her other relatives. To Mama a deep, lived familiarity with how these objects work and where they come from is necessary to connect with the family history contained within them.

> Maggie can't appreciate those quilts! ...She's probably backward enough to put them into everyday use.

Related Characters: Dee (speaker), Mama, Maggie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Dee speaks this quote to Mama as she and Mama argue over whether Dee or Maggie should keep their grandmother's hand-stitched quilts. Dee, who would like to hang them on her walls, believes she should keep them. Dee argues that Maggie is "backward enough" to put the quilts to "everyday use"—which is to say, to use them as blankets—as their grandmother presumably intended the quilts to be used.

When Dee describes Maggie as "backward," she essentially betrays her contempt of the very culture that she supposedly wants to venerate and preserve—the rural life that her ancestors come from, and that Mama and Maggie still live. Dee fails to see Maggie's use of the quilts as appreciation, and sets appreciation in contrast with "everyday use." For Dee, appreciating her heritage means exiling it to the past, rather than continuing to interact with it in her everyday life. This quote is significant because it reveals many of the hypocrisies contained in Dee's worldview.

> 'You just don't understand,' she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.
> 'What don't I understand?' I wanted to know.
> 'Your heritage,' she said.

Related Characters: Dee, Mama (speaker), Maggie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote follows Dee and Mama's argument over the quilts, and Mama's decision to give them to Maggie. After all that has transpired, Dee's assertion that Mama and Maggie do not "understand" their heritage is extremely ironic—since Walker has, by this point in the story, made it abundantly clear that it is Dee who is out of touch with her family's way of life. Dee's utter lack of understanding contrasts with her rigorous education, suggesting that "understanding" and education might be two distinct systems of knowledge. "Understanding" seems to be what Mama has—a genuine connection with her family's customs and the people in her life.

Dee, on the other hand, and despite her formal education, lacks the ability to engage authentically with her culture, and instead favors a deadened, aestheticized, decorative version of it. Since the story's sympathies seem to lie with Mama, Walker implies that "understanding" may be just as, if not more, important than formal education when engaging with one's own identity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

EVERYDAY USE

Mama, an elderly black woman and the first-person narrator, begins the story by saying that she is waiting for her daughter Dee in the yard of her **house**, which she cleaned the day before in preparation for her visit. Mama goes on to describe the yard, saying it is like a living room, with the ground swept clean like a floor. Mama's younger daughter, Maggie, is also waiting for Dee. Mama describes Maggie as "homely," "hopeless," and "ashamed," and predicts that Maggie will be nervous until after Dee's visit is over, as Maggie will look at Dee with "a mixture of envy and awe."

Walker establishes that Mama is hard working and devoted by describing how Mama painstakingly cleaned the yard for Dee's arrival. Mama also shows her sense of attachment towards her domestic space. This space includes the yard, which to Mama is an extension of her house— she describes it affectionately as a "living room." Meanwhile, Maggie's deep insecurity is immediately clear, as Mama uses words like "homely," "ashamed," and "hopeless" to describe her. Maggie's nervousness about her sister's visit implies that their relationship is somewhat strained.

Mama describes television shows in which "a child who has 'made it'" confronts her parents. On these shows, Mama says, the meeting is pleasant, warm, and loving. Mama fantasizes about making up with her daughter, Dee, on such a television show (it's not yet clear why Mama and her daughter need to reconcile). Mama pictures herself stepping out of a limousine and talking to a television host similar to Johnny Carson. In her daydream, she and Dee hug, with tears in their eyes. Dee gives her mother an orchid, even though Dee once told her mother that orchids are "tacky."

When Mama describes her daydream of reconciling with her daughter and all the joy and love that accompanies it, the reader can infer that their relationship thus far has been the opposite of what she describes. In Mama's wildest fantasies, her reconciliation with her daughter coincides with visions of material wealth (she steps out of a limousine, for example) that do not, apparently, reflect her reality. Walker underlines the dream's fragility when Mama imagines Dee giving her an orchid, despite the fact that she knows Dee hates that kind of flower in real life. The orchid, as an object, stands in for the gap between Mama's fantasies and her reality.

Mama transitions into describing herself and her real daily life: the way she can work outside all day, her "rough, man-working hands," the way she handles cattle. Mama discusses her simple clothing (flannel nightgowns and overalls) and her farm life.

As Mama describes her life, it becomes even clearer that her reality is far from television-ready. Mama's sense of self seems primarily connected to what she can do rather than how she looks. For example, Mama's clothes are primarily practical rather than stylish.

But in her mind, Mama's real personhood "doesn't show on television." Instead, Mama pictures herself on the show as a slimmer woman, with glistening skin and a witty manner. Mama's vision of her television reconciliation with Dee breaks as she contrasts herself as she is in real life—homely, hardworking—with how she imagines herself on such a show—glamorous, confident. Dee, Mama imagines, would never be proud of her as she is. Anyway, thinks Mama, she would be unable to make **eye contact** with a white, male host. Dee, on the other hand, could make eye contact with anyone.

Mama recognizes the schism between who she is and who she would have to be on such a television show, and thus (presumably) to be loved by Dee. Specifically, when Mama mentions her inability to make eye contact with white men, she connects her own internalized racism with her failure to reconcile with her daughter. Dee's ability to make eye contact with white men, and thus to challenge the racial expectations of her time, sets her apart from her mother, and indicates both her own sense of empowerment and how that empowerment estranges her from her family. Eye contact, which Walker uses symbolically for the first time here, is presented as an equalizing force, and stands in for resistance to racism— a significance which will become complicated as the story progresses.

Maggie, Mama's younger daughter, interrupts Mama's musings, asking her mother how she looks in her pink skirt and red blouse, both of which are too big for her. Mama tells Maggie to join her in the yard. As she does so, Mama observes Maggie's plain appearance and limping gait, which she says is similar to that of a dog recently hit by "someone rich enough to own a car." Mama contrasts Maggie's unattractive appearance and timid carriage with her sister's good looks and self-confidence. Dee is better proportioned than her sister, and has nicer hair.

As Walker presents Maggie a second time, she emphasizes her lack of self-confidence even more profoundly. Rather than Maggie wearing her clothes, the clothes seem to wear Maggie—they dwarf and obscure Maggie, rendering her shapeless, and giving the reader the sense that Maggie lacks control over the image she projects. When Mama describes the way Maggie walks, she describes Maggie as a wounded animal, highlighting Maggie's lowly way of carrying herself. When Mama goes on to compare Dee to Maggie, the reader gets the sense that Maggie lives in Dee's shadow, constantly compared to her prettier, more successful sister, even by her own mother.

Mama notes that Maggie's submissiveness first became a problem after their old **house** burned down. She wonders how long it has been since that traumatic event. Mama then vividly flashes back to that house fire, which completely destroyed their ancestral family home. Mama remembers Maggie's hair burning and her dress disintegrating into soot. She thinks about the way the flames reflected in Maggie's eyes. Dee was outside of the house when the fire happened, and Mama remembers her watching it from under a tree in the yard. Resentfully, Mama thinks that Dee probably wanted to dance when the house burned.

The house fire Mama describes clearly traumatized the family, and she repeatedly refers back to the fire throughout the story. In Mama's flashbacks, she and Maggie were clearly most in danger due to the fire, while Dee watched it from outside. The memory of the fire complicates the symbol of the house as a site of familial love and history, turning the house also into a site of trauma and pain, muddling its joyful image. The fire also seems to have exacerbated Mama's resentment for Dee for hating their house, which was so loved by Mama and Maggie. It is confusing and embittering that a memory which is so painful for Mama and Maggie could have been a source of liberation and joy for Dee.

But it wasn't only the **house** Dee hated. Mama remembers how, as a child, Dee also hated Maggie. Once Mama and their church raised money for Dee's education, however, Dee's resentment lessened. Still, Mama thinks, after Dee became educated, she harbored an intense resentment towards her family. When Dee would read to Mama and Maggie, it was like she was "forcing words, lies, other folk's habits, whole lives upon us two." Mama describes Dee's prickliness and impatience in reading to her family at length.

Mama's flashback to the fire triggers a whole series of remembrances of how Dee has hurt her mother and sister over the years. Walker continues to build the sense that Mama and Dee's relationship is extremely tense as she describes the gap in education between them. Mama notes that she and her church paid for Dee's education, and so she perceives a stinging lack of gratitude from Dee. Dee's act of reading to Mama and Maggie is described not as a kindness, but a kind of violence against them, which Walker shows through her choice of aggressive, painful language (burning, forcing, etc.). Walker shows Dee's education, while liberating for her, to be oppressive and degrading to her family.

Mama also mentions Dee's childhood desire for high quality clothing and other "nice things" to reflect her personal style. She wanted, Mama remembers, shoes to match her dresses, and a new, brightly colored graduation dress.

Mama suggests that Dee's desire for "nice things" set her apart from her family as a teenager. Repeatedly, Walker uses differing relationships to objects to establish character. Compared to Maggie, for example, Dee comes across as an aesthetically driven, sophisticated person, with profound interest in expressing herself and her difference from her family.

Unlike Dee, Mama never had an education. Unfortunately for her, Mama's school closed down after the second grade. Mournfully, Mama blames her inability to ask questions on her lack of education. In this respect, she contrasts herself with Dee, whose education allows her to be critical of her environment. Maggie, unlike her mother, is literate, and reads to Mama in their spare time, but she doesn't read particularly well— certainly not as well as Dee.

In this section, Mama connects her lack of education with her inability to question the social conditions that structure her reality. She sets up the idea that education is part of how Dee became such an outspoken opponent to the racism she experiences. In Mama's mind, education has afforded Dee the ability to question the boundaries of her reality, while Mama's lack thereof prevents her from daring to do so. Maggie's existence, however, seems to temper this assumption somewhat, as she has received some limited education (she can read), but lacks the self-confidence and natural intellect to assert herself and demand change.

Mama turns her back on the **house**, remarking on its similarity to the house that came before it— the house that burned down. She takes in the tin roof, the windows without glass in them. Mama thinks that when Dee arrives, she will want to tear it down. Mama remembers how Dee was ashamed of the house, and how she refused to bring friends there.

Once again, Mama thinks about the house in a way that both emphasizes her affection for it (she takes in all the details with an attentive consideration) and her sense of trauma associated with it (she constantly compares it to their house that burned down). The house continues to be a symbol of simultaneous love and trauma, and a site of resentment between Mama and Dee. Dee's shame about the house and the way her family lives, manifested in her refusal to bring friends there, adds to the sense of the house as a fraught place.

Not, Mama thinks, that Dee had many friends. But she did have a few. Mama remembers them— "furtive" boys and "nervous" girls, who were impressed by how Dee carried herself, and by Dee's reading. She remembers also a lover of Dee's, who left her for a "city girl."

This section allows Walker to cast a slightly more sympathetic light on Dee, as we see her not only as an antagonist to her devoted family, but also as a lonely child who had trouble making friends. This section helps to humanize Dee, and also to adjust our view on Dee's education, which not only helped her to fight racism and buy expensive things, but also to make friends.

Mama's reminiscing stops when, at last, Dee and her partner (Mama is unsure if they are married or not), Hakim-a-Barber, arrive at the **house**. As they pull up in their car, Maggie tries to retreat into the house, but Mama stops her. Dee steps out of the car wearing a floor-length, brightly colored dress, gold earrings, and jingling bracelets. Mama, unsure at first, decides that she thinks the dress is beautiful. Maggie seems surprised by the style of Dee's hair, which she wears in an Afro.

At last, Walker introduces the reader to Dee not only as Mama remembers her, but as she is in reality and at present. Dee arrives with her partner, and Mama's lack of clarity about whether they are married or not speaks even further to the distance between church-going, traditional Mama and her daughter. Meanwhile, Maggie's anxiety reaches its apex as she tries to flee into the house. Once Dee steps out of the car, Mama's intense examination of her wardrobe suggests how distinct Dee's style choices are. She describes Dee's clothing as both literally and figuratively noisy: her dress is "loud," and her bracelets "jingle." In this way, Dee's clothes reflect her own outspoken nature. Mama's decision—and it seems like a decision, coming toward the end of her description of Dee's outfit—that she likes the dress reflects Mama's desire to reconcile with her daughter.

Next, Dee greets her family in Luganda, an African language, saying "Wa-su-zo Tean-o!" Hakim-a-barber follows suit, saying "Asalamakim" (an Arabic greeting). He tries to hug Maggie and, in doing so, startles her.

Dee and Hakim-a-barber seem to be taking part in a tradition of African-Americans returning to their African roots in an attempt to circumvent the history of white violence against black people. They greet Dee's family in Luganda and Arabic. The greeting is silly and somewhat awkward, however, since neither Mama nor Maggie speak these languages.


After they say hello, Dee retrieves a camera from her car and takes pictures of Maggie and Mama with their **house**. She makes sure to photograph Mama and Maggie together with the house, not just the two of them. When a cow appears, Dee includes it in the photograph composition. She puts the camera back in the car when she is finished.

Dee's photography, which might at first seem sentimental and sweet, becomes peculiar when, as Mama notices, she insists that the pictures include the house and, later, the cow. Dee seems to not be taking pictures of her family as they are as people, but rather as part of the quaint landscape of Dee's youth. Dee attempts to turn her family into an art object (a well-composed photograph) rather than authentically appreciating how they are as living people.


When photography session is over, Mama addresses Dee by name. Dee, however, corrects Mama, and tells Mama to instead call her "Wangero," an African name. When Mama asks what happened to "Dee," Dee says, "She's dead," because she "couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress [her]." Mama reminds Dee that she is actually named after her aunt Dicie, who was named, in turn, after her older ancestors. Dee, however, doesn't seem interested in the history of her name.

In this conflict, Walker showcases the difference between Mama and Dee's worldviews. Dee states that her desire to go by "Wangero," an African name, rather than her given name, is a result of her desire to escape the system of oppression that her personal history is connected to. Mama, on the other hand, sees Dee's name as a link to her family history, and to people that Mama knew and loved. Dee is named after her black female ancestors, but, presumably, her Western name came at some point from European roots. As Mama explains the history of Dee's name, Dee clearly is uninterested in changing her view of it. Despite Dee's intelligence, she close-mindedly neglects to listen to her mother's alternate viewpoint on the name's heritage.

As Mama explains the name's lineage, Dee and Hakim-a-Barber give each other looks over her mother and sister's heads, communicating through **eye contact**. Ultimately, Mama agrees to call Dee "Wangero," settling the issue.

As Mama explains, Dee and Hakim-a-barber communicate via eye contact. In this instance, eye contact again is a power Dee possesses and Mama does not. This time, however, Dee uses it specifically to leave Mama out. Ultimately, Mama, favoring reconciliation, ends the argument by conceding to call Dee "Wangero."

Mama reflects that Dee and Hakim-a-Barber's greeting of "Asalamakim" reminds her of the cattle farmers down the road, who say hello the same way. She remembers a time when their cattle were poisoned by "white folks," and how she walked a mile and a half to see it.

Mama's anecdote about her neighbors showcases the intense and violent racism of the society she and Maggie live in. Equally notable, though, is the way that Mama tells the story—the poisoning is situated in a clause modifying Mama's claim that she walked a mile and a half to see it, not as the main clause of the sentence. Mama views the actual racism, then, as part of the conditions of the events in Mama's life—something to be taken for granted—rather than the content of it.

The family eats dinner together— collard greens and pork. The fare disgusts Hakim-a-barber, but delights Dee, who eats the cornbread and potatoes with gusto.

Mama seems surprised by Dee's newfound affinity for the family's traditional dishes. Dee not only enjoys the food; she obsesses over it somewhat excessively. Dee's attitude towards her family's life is completely different than how Mama described her as a teenager—sullen, resentful, and uninterested.

Mama notices Dee's newfound enthusiasm for the family's possessions. Dee strokes the "rump prints" on the family's worn benches. She closes her hand around Grandma Dee's butter dish (the family has many ancestors named "Dee") before spying the butter churn.

Dee's changed mindset towards the objects of her upbringing, like her attitude toward the food she grew up with, seems to have completely changed from when she was an adolescent. She now covets them, admiring their antiquity and the family history that she believes they represent. However, Dee's interest comes across as somewhat out-of-touch. She admires Grandma Dee's butter dish, but not her own name, which comes from Grandma Dee and her Aunt Dicie..

Dee excitedly runs over to the butter churn and asks if she can have the churn top, which was whittled by Uncle Buddy. Dee asks for the dasher as well, which she believes Uncle Buddy also whittled. Maggie, however, knows better, and gently corrects Dee, saying it was Aunt Dee's first husband, Stash, who made the object. Dee laughs off Maggie's correction, saying that she has a "brain like an elephant."

Despite the infrequency of Dee's visits, and despite her tense relationship with her family, Dee shamelessly asks to take home the butter churn. She tries to assert her interest in the family history by connecting it to Uncle Buddy, but again the shallowness of Dee's understanding of her family history becomes clear when Dee incorrectly assumes that Uncle Buddy whittled both the churn top and the dasher. Dee's reaction to Maggie's correction—laughter—implies that she does not actually care about the details of her family history, but only an abstract vision of it.

Dee then goes on to detail how she will use the churn top as a centerpiece and do "something artistic" with the dasher. As Dee wraps up the dasher to take away, Mama touches it and looks it over. She ponders the thumb and handprints worn into the dasher from so much use, and admires the color of the wood, which came from a tree that grew in Aunt Dee and Stash's yard.

Walker contrasts Dee's orientation towards her family's heirlooms and Mama's. Dee is interested in the representative and decorative value of the family's possessions. She wishes to turn them into art objects, preserving them but killing any possibility of their use. Mama, on the other hand, pays attention to the ways the objects have been used—she thoroughly knows the objects' history and admires them not for visual beauty, but as a way of interacting with and building on the past. To Mama, practical use is part of the family tradition.

After dinner, Dee investigates a trunk at the foot of Mama's bed, and emerges with two **quilts**. Mama observes that they are quilts she made together with Grandma Dee and Aunt Dee, and remembers the patterns they used to make them—"Lone Star" and "Walk around the Mountain." Mama also notes the source of the fabric—cobbled together from scraps of Grandma Dee's dresses, pieces of a Grandfather's shirts, and one piece from another ancestor's Civil War uniform.

Dee continues to invasively look for objects to take home rather than catching up with her long-estranged family. As she emerges with the quilts, Mama immediately recognizes not just the quilts themselves, but also the way they were made and with which patterns, and where exactly the fabric came from. Mama's intimate understanding of these objects stems from the fact that she lives each day in the lifestyle for which the quilts were made. She knows the quilts' history because she lived *it. Her familiarity with the quilts triggers a whole web of interlocking family stories and nuances of ancestors' lives that Mama has access to due to her active engagement with that history.*

Sweetly, Dee asks to take her grandmother's **quilts** home with her in addition to the butter churn. Mama suggests she take some of the other, newer quilts, but Dee refuses, saying she does not want quilts stitched by machine. When Mama points out that this will make them last longer, Dee insists that the hand-stitching is what makes them valuable. When Mama reaches out to touch the quilts, Dee pulls them back, out of reach.

When Mama offers Dee the newer, machine-stitched quilts, Dee clearly does not think they are as valuable. Dee privileges the older quilts because they are representative of a more distant past rather than an immediate one. This recalls Dee's adoption of an African name, from a culture her family hasn't been a part of for generations, instead of keeping the name Dee, which has much more meaning in the recent past. For Dee, heritage must be fully removed from her current life in order to be appealing. As Dee pulls the quilts from Mama, she seems to have little respect for her mother as an actual person, or the fact that the quilts are Mama's property.

Mama at last tells Dee that she cannot give her the **quilts** because she promised to give the quilts to Maggie for her marriage to John Thomas, a local man. Dee, affronted, argues that Maggie can't appreciate the quilts, because she's "backward enough" to put them "to everyday use." Mama retorts that she should hope so— she hasn't kept the quilts so long in order for them to go unused. Mama remembers, but keeps to herself, the fact that she offered Dee a family quilt before Dee went to college, but that Dee did not want it then, thinking it was too old-fashioned.

The difference between Dee's visual, hollow appreciation of her family's heirlooms and Mama's interest in authentic engagement with the past through these objects comes to a head in this argument over the quilts. Dee lords her education over Mama and Maggie, suggesting their lifestyle is "hackward." By extension, Dee suggests that the culture in which Maggie and Mama live, the culture she supposedly wishes to celebrate by hanging the quilts on her wall, is, itself, "backward." Dee's hypocrisy becomes especially evident here: she only admires objects that represent her family's lifestyle once that way of life is dead. Moreover, Dee's hypocrisy also shows in her complete change in her relationship to the quilts, which she never wanted before.

Unwillingly to back down, Dee argues that, by using them as blankets, Maggie would wear the **quilts** out in five years. Mama, however, shrugs Dee's point off, saying that if Maggie does wear the quilts out, she knows how to sew, and so can always sew some more.

Dee is concerned with preserving the family heritage, implying that the heritage would (or should) otherwise disintegrate. For Dee, quilting is already a thing of the past. Mama, on the other hand, sees Maggie as a way of keeping up their culture. Since Maggie can sew new quilts, there's no need to preserve the culture—it's still alive and thriving.

Still, Dee insists that it is those particular **quilts** she thinks are important. Mama asks what Dee intends to do with them anyway, and Dee says she wants to hang them on her walls.

Once again, Dee wishes to use her family's possessions as decorations and deadened symbols of her family's history, despite the fact that she's not actually very connected to that more immediate history. In Dee's mind, the best way to revere her family history is to preserve and aestheticize it, rather than actually use it and live with it.

Meanwhile, Maggie comes and stands by the door. She tells Mama that Dee can have the **quilts**, sounding like "somebody used to never winning anything." Maggie says that she can remember her grandmother just fine without the quilts.

Walker again portrays Maggie as a character who is so used to not getting her way that she immediately concedes the quilts to Dee. Maggie echoes Mama's earlier behavior when Mama quickly agreed to call Dee "Wangero" just to keep the peace, and willingly gave up the butter churn.

Mama thinks hard, looking at Maggie, taking in her snuff-filled lip, her burn-scarred hands hidden in the folds of her too-big clothes, her sad resignation that she will not be able to keep the **quilts**, and her lack of anger at Dee. Mama is suddenly struck by a feeling she describes as similar to one she gets in church, when "the spirit of God touches [her]." Mama pulls Maggie into the room, snatches the quilts from Dee, and dumps them into Maggie's lap, telling Dee to take a couple of the other, newer quilts.

But this time, Mama is not willing to appease Dee. When Mama gives Maggie the quilts instead of Dee, she breaks the unusual family dynamic, in which Mama and Maggie sacrifice so that Dee can have what she wants—in her own way, Mama is finally "looking someone in the eye" and standing up for herself in this moment. The family heirlooms will now be continually engaged with as a way to maintain a connection to, and build upon, the family's heritage and the amorphous collection of memories and meaning that this heritage entails. Mama's win in this fight might be viewed as Walker's endorsement of Mama's view of objects and heritage over Dee's.

Dee, enraged, exits the house and walks towards her car. As Maggie and Mama follow her, Dee turns and tells them they don't understand their "heritage."

Dee's assertion that her family does not understand its heritage is highly ironic— clearly it is Dee, with her utter removal from the family's everyday traditions, who lacks understanding of her own heritage. Walker also draws attention to Dee's lack of understanding despite her education.

Dee then kisses Maggie goodbye and tells her she "ought to try and make something" of herself, since it's "a new day for us." She puts on sunglasses, obscuring her **eyes**. Maggie smiles at Dee, or perhaps at her sunglasses. Mama notes that it is a "real smile," not a nervous or fearful one.

Dee cannot leave without adding insult to injury. She clearly shows her contempt for the lifestyle behind the paraphernalia she covets, telling Maggie she "ought to try and make something" of herself, as if to imply she were not something already, once again using her educated status to degrade her family. Dee's sunglasses at last obscure her dominating eye contact, and Maggie smiles genuinely at them, finally confident in returning her sister's (albeit invisible) gaze.

Mama and Maggie watch Dee's car pull away. Then the two of them sit in the front of the **house** and take snuff and until it's time to go back into the house and go to bed.

The story ends with Mama and Maggie more or less where they started— together in the yard. It is a scene of domestic intimacy and comfort. With Dee gone, Mama and Maggie enjoy their home once again, free of judgment of their way of life and their traditions.

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