"Everyday Use" was published early in Alice Walker's writing career, appearing in her collection In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women in 1973. The work was enthusiastically reviewed upon publication, and "Everyday Use" has since been called by some critics the best of Walker's short stories. In letting a rural black woman with little education tell a story that affirms the value of her heritage, Walker articulates what has since become, as critic Barbara Christian notes, two central themes in her writing: "the importance of the quilt in her work ... [and] the creation of African American Southern women as subjects in their own right." When Mrs. Johnson snatches her ancestors' quilts from her daughter Dee, who wants to hang them on a wall, and gives them to Maggie, Walker illuminates her life-long celebration of rural Southern black womanhood. The motif of quilting has since become central to Walker's concerns, because it suggests the strength to be found in connecting with one's roots and one's past. As with many other stories by Walker, "Everyday Use" is narrated by the unrefined voice of a rural black woman, in the author's attempt to give a voice to a
traditionally disenfranchised segment of the population.

**Everyday Use: Alice Walker Biography**

Walker's short story "Everyday Use" contains several important parallels to the author's own life. Born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker grew up in an environment much like that described in the story. Her parents were both sharecroppers, her family lived in a run-down shack, and racial segregation was legally enforced, prompting the author to describe the times as America's own era of apartheid. Like Maggie Johnson, Walker was disfigured as a child. A gunshot wound left her blind in one eye; she became shy and withdrew into her own world of reading and writing. Like Dee Johnson, Walker's abilities garnered her a scholarship to Spelman College, which led her away from her poverty-stricken background to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1961. These were especially turbulent times for African Americans, and Walker soon became involved in efforts to improve conditions for blacks. In 1964, she travelled to Uganda as an exchange student. She returned to the United States for graduation, and upon receiving a writing fellowship she made plans to return to Africa. However, her job as a case worker in New York City's welfare department reconfirmed her commitment to the American black community, and she soon traveled to Mississippi to work on a voter-registration drive.

Walker also continued writing, and she began to achieve national attention by publishing her first book of poetry in 1968 and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in 1970. Further novels, poetry, essays, and children's books followed, and Walker's popularity grew enormously in 1983 when her novel *The Color Purple* garnered the Pulitzer Prize, making her the first black woman writer to receive the award. Her prominence as a major voice in American literature was further solidified when Steven Spielberg made the novel into a major motion picture in 1985. Throughout her career, Walker's art has shed new light on various aspects of African-American experience, particularly the trials and tribulations of black women. Her feminist standpoint has led to some criticism for her often unflattering portrayals of black men.

**Everyday Use: Summary**

Alice Walker's modern classic "Everyday Use" tells the story of a mother and her two daughters' conflicting ideas about their identities and ancestry. The mother narrates the story of the day one daughter, Dee, visits from college and clashes with the other daughter, Maggie, over the possession of some heirloom quilts.

The story begins with the narrator, a "big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" awaiting the homecoming of her daughter Dee, an educated woman who now lives in the city. Accompanying her is her younger daughter, Maggie, a shy girl who regards her sister with a "mixture of envy and awe." As they wait, the narrator reveals details of the family history, specifically the relationship between her two girls. A fire when they were children destroyed their first house and left Maggie badly scarred on her arms and legs. The mother's memory of the night the house burned defines her two daughters: Maggie "with her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little peppery flakes" and Dee "standing off under the sweet gum tree...[with] a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot chimney."

Since the fire the two daughters have taken diverging paths. Maggie has a little education, but according to her mother, "she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by." She is, however, engaged to marry and will soon leave her mother's house. Dee, on the other hand, has been ambitious and determined since girlhood to rise above her humble beginnings. Thanks to her mother's and the church's fundraising efforts, she has gone off to school in Augusta.

When Dee arrives, Maggie and her mother are waiting in the front yard, which serves the family as "an extended living room." She emerges from the car dressed in bright clothing and gold jewelry; her boyfriend,
Hakim-a-barber, has wild-looking hair. After greeting her mother and Maggie in a language they do not understand, Dee starts taking pictures, posing Maggie and her mother in front of the house as though she were a tourist. Dee tells her mother that "Dee is dead," and her new name is "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo." She claims she could not stand being "named after the people who oppress me." Her mother's complaints that "Dee" is an old family name do not register.

During the meal Dee reveals her true intentions in visiting: to collect objects for her home that she can use to display her heritage. First she takes the butter churn, which she plans to use "as a centerpiece for the alcove table." After dinner Dee continues to search for objects for her collection and latches on to the quilts that had been made by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. The quilts contain pieces of family history, scraps from old dresses and shirts that family members have worn. One patch is constructed of the girls' great grandfather's Civil War uniform.

The quilts, however, have already been promised to Maggie for her wedding. Dee contends that she has a right to them because she understands their value as folk art, declaring them "priceless." Maggie, on the other hand, is prepared to relinquish her rights to them rather than argue with her sister. When Maggie tells her she can have the quilts, because she "can 'member Grandma Dee" without them, the mother knows instantly who is the most deserving. She hugs Maggie, who was "used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her," and "snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap." After Dee departs without the quilts, Maggie smiles a "real smile" for the first time.

Everyday Use: Characters

Asalamalakim
See Hakim-a-barber.

Grandma Dee
Although Grandma Dee, as the Johnson women call her, does not appear in the story, she is a significant presence. Maggie is attached to the quilts because they make her think of Grandma Dee. Thus, although the woman is dead, she represents the cherished family presence that lives on in Maggie's and her mother's connection to the past.

Hakim-a-barber
Hakim-a-barber is Dee's boyfriend who accompanies her on her visit back home. Though he has grown his hair long in an African style that identifies him with the black power movement, he refuses to eat collard greens and pork at dinner—traditional African-American foods. This minor character's name is perhaps his most significant feature. Mrs. Johnson confusedly accepts his black Muslim greeting, "Asalamalakim," as his name, and "Hakim-a-barber" is her guess at the pronunciation of what he tells her to call him. This confusion signals the gap between black nationalist ideas and rural African-American life.

Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo
See Dee Johnson.

Dee Johnson
Dee is Mrs. Johnson's oldest daughter; the one who has always been determined, popular, and successful. Upon returning home after escaping her impoverished home life and forging a new identity at college, one which ostensibly celebrates her African heritage, Dee tells her mother that "Dee is dead," and her name is now Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Thus, Dee denies her real heritage, in which she was named for her aunt. Dee's other attempts to appreciate her cultural heritage miss the mark: she wants to display her mother's possessions in her home as examples of folk art but refuses to recognize their greater value to her mother and sister as
objects of "everyday use" that they still use.

**Maggie Johnson**
Burned severely in a house fire as a child, the shy, stammering Maggie Johnson cowers in the overwhelming presence of her sister. While Dee has moved on to an entirely new life, Maggie still lives in poverty with her mother, putting "priceless" objects to "everyday use." At the end of the story, the quiet, self-conscious Maggie smiles, "a real smile, not scared," because her mother has finally recognized that she, not Dee, is the daughter who understands her heritage and the importance of connecting with one's ancestors.

**Mrs. Johnson**
Mrs. Johnson is the narrator of this story, overseeing its events and interpreting, more through her actions than her words, their significance. As she waits for her daughter Dee to return home for a visit, she demonstrates her lack of self-esteem by imagining a much thinner, prettier version of herself meeting her daughter on a television show. Near the end of the story, Mrs. Johnson demonstrates a shift in her maternal sympathies by taking the quilts from Dee and giving them to Maggie, signaling for the reader where the author's own sympathies also lie.

**Everyday Use: Themes**
In "Everyday Use," the contrast between Dee's beliefs and those of her mother and sister is emphasized by the different values the characters place on some old quilts and other objects in the home.

**Heritage**
The main theme in the story concerns the characters' connections to their ancestral roots. Dee Johnson believes that she is affirming her African heritage by changing her name, her mannerisms, and her appearance, even though her family has lived in the United States for several generations. Maggie and Mrs. Johnson are confused and intimidated by her new image as "Wangero." Their own connections to their heritage rest on their memories of their mothers and grandmothers; they prefer to remember them for who they were as individuals, not as members of a particular race. Because of their differing viewpoints, each values the Johnson's possessions for different reasons. Dee digs around the house for objects she can display in her own home as examples of African-American folk art. Maggie and her mother value the same objects not for their artistic value, but because they remind them of their loved ones. Dee admires a butterchurn, and when Maggie says it was carved by their aunt's first husband—"His name was Henry, but they called him Stash"—Dee responds condescendingly that her sister's memory is like an elephant's. But the story suggests that Maggie's elephant-like memory for her loved ones and her appreciation for their handiwork is a more genuine way to celebrate their heritage than Dee's "artistic" interests in removing these ordinary objects and exalting them as examples of their African roots.

**Materialism**
Dee's materialism is demonstrated at a young age when she watches her modest home burn with "a look of concentration on her face." Later, "Dee wanted nice things"—particularly clothes—and was interested in maintaining a style that belied her humble roots. Her mother states that when she sees the new house, a three-room shack with no "real" windows and a tin roof, "she will want to tear it down." Her appearance confirms this trend: she is dressed in elaborate clothes and gold jewelry, Dee's interest in the butterchurn and the quilts is raised because they are "priceless" objects. She wants to possess them as relics and would not think of employing them for "everyday use." In contrast to Dee's materialism is Maggie's and her mother's pride in their home and their contentedness with life. They have made the front yard "clean and wavy" in anticipation of her arrival, and the yard is "more comfortable than most people know."

**Everyday Use: Characters**
Community vs. Isolation

The quilts represent the Johnsons' connection to their community. They are formed by patches of clothing from many peoples' clothes, forming a mosaic that represents the past, their loved ones' lives, and their family history. Dee's lack of interest in the people with whom Maggie associates the quilt underscores the story's emphasis on the importance of community. Furthermore, while Dee cannot wait to escape her family's poverty so she can go to college and have nice things, her mother and sister have a clean yard in which "anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree." Maggie, despite her shyness, is engaged to be married, showing her ability to connect with another person. Dee, who Maggie suggests has never had real friends, has been jilted by a man who "flew to marry a cheap city girl." By showing the different paths the sisters have taken, Walker suggests that black nationalists such as Dee and Hakim-a-barber, who identify with their African ancestry by rejecting white ways, have cut themselves off from connecting with their backgrounds, which often have not been steeped in African tradition. Dee's apparent embarrassment about her rural roots contrasts sharply with Maggie's heartfelt connection through the quilts to her grandmother.

Everyday Use: Style

Walker uses several literary devices to examine the themes in the story and to give a voice to the poor and the uneducated.

Point of View

"Everyday Use" is told in first-person point of view. Mrs. Johnson, an uneducated woman, tells the story herself. The reader learns what she thinks about her two daughters, and her observations reveal her astute observations about life. This technique seeks to validate the experiences of an often oppressed group of people: lower-class, black women. By putting Mrs. Johnson at center stage, Walker confirms her value and importance in society. Mrs. Johnson has mixed emotions about her daughters. She likens Maggie's demeanor to "a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car," and says that Dee's reading "burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know." These conflicting feelings show the reader the complex nature of her thoughts and her ability to size up people when necessary. Her thoughts are compounded further by her fantasy of reuniting with Dee on a television talk show where "Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue."

Symbolism

The story is not only rich in symbolism, it is also about symbolism. The quilts are the central symbol of the story, representing the connectedness of history and the intergenerational ties of the family. Other symbols include Maggie's burned skin, which can be interpreted as depicting how she has been "burned" by the circumstances of her Life. Mrs. Johnson's "man-working" hands symbolize the rough life she has hand to forge from the land on which they live. Names become symbolic in the story as well. Dee thinks her name represents "the people who oppress me," and substitutes an African name that has no relation to her family roots. When Hakim-a-barber says that he does not eat collard greens and pork—traditional African-American foods—he symbolically denies his heritage despite his complicated African name. Clothing also represents the characters. Mrs. Johnson wears utilitarian clothing: overalls and flannel nightgowns, representing her no-frills approach to life. Dee wears a "yellow organdy dress" to her graduation and other wild, colorful clothing. These outfits represent her colorful, vibrant nature as well as her unwillingness to fit in to her surroundings, a harsh land more suited to farm clothing. Maggie's character is symbolized by the dress that "[falls] off her in little black papery flakes" during the house fire: fragile and burned.

Irony

The central contradiction in this story emerges when readers understand Walker's point about Dee's efforts to appreciate her heritage. While Dee has acquired an education and understands her African past, she mistakenly looks to this history in order to affirm her heritage, forgetting her real origins and the people who
raised her. She admires the quilts, particularly because her grandmother has sewed them by hand. She is more entranced by the thought of someone sewing by hand than by the person who did the sewing.

Diction and Dialect
In relating the story in first-person, Walker gives Mrs. Johnson a pattern of speech that helps define her character. An uneducated woman, Mrs. Johnson nonetheless is able to express herself well. She waits in a yard that has been made "clean and wavy," meaning that she has taken pride in her house and fixed it up in anticipation of her daughter's arrival. Walker's subtle rendering of Mrs. Johnson's voice reveals that this older rural woman can also speak with efficient, lyrical clarity, as in her account of having "knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and [having] had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall," or in her description of Hakmi-a-bar-ber's real name, which is "twice as long and three times as hard" to pronounce. Walker artfully suggests, then, that a "good" education does not necessarily result in a "better" form of speech.

Everyday Use: Historical Context

The Black Power Movement
Even before their emancipation from slavery, African Americans struggled to define their collective identity within the framework of American society. Even after slavery was outlawed, blacks gained the right to vote, and legal decisions dismantled formal segregation, true equality was far from reality. By the 1960s, following the success of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, some African Americans began to take pride in their heritage as a way of bolstering their esteem, forging a group identity, and creating a platform for greater political power. Known as "black pride" or Black Nationalism, these ideas encouraged many young African Americans to learn about their cultural ancestry, grow their hair into "Afros," dress in traditional African clothing, and reject their "slave names" (as Malcolm X called most blacks' given names). Many of these tendencies are exhibited by Dee and Hakim-a-barber in "Everyday Use." The Black Panthers, led by former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee president Stokely Carmichael, embodied these ideas in their "black power" slogan as they fought for civil rights and voter registration. However, by the early 1970s, many of these organizations were accused of discrimination against women in the way they were organized and run, and writers like Walker sought to portray the voice of the black woman apart from a larger political context.

The Nation of Islam
Another form of African American self-assertion that gained popularity in the early 1970s was the Nation of Islam, a religious and political organization founded in the 1930s and known popularly as the Black Muslims. This movement, which since Malcolm X's death in 1965 has been led by Louis Farrakhan, asserts that white society is not capable of being nonracist. Furthermore, instead of seeking integration, the organization encourages blacks to separate themselves into an independent community within the United States (a rejection of the back-to-Africa beliefs of earlier African-American separatists). Like Dee Johnson, a.k.a. Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, Black Muslim followers usually change their names, symbolically rejecting white society by rejecting their "slave names." The Nation of Islam also espouses the home as the center of community life, with a male-led family and a helpful, supportive wife and mother.

The Black Arts Movement
The cultural extension of the Black Power movement was the Black Arts movement, a conscious effort by many artists and critics to celebrate African-American culture for its own forms, ideas, and styles, rather than seeing it as derivative of European-American culture. This movement focused on the works of black artists and writers, and on the validity of various forms of black folk art, including quilts and other items normally put to "everyday use." Some artists, such as Alice Walker, questioned what they saw as three particular deficits of the Black Arts movement: its tendency to speak for all blacks in a subtle assumption that all blacks'
experiences were the same; its conception of blackness in almost entirely masculine terms; and its implication that urban black experience is somehow more "real" than rural black experience. Walker addressed all three of these concerns in "Everyday Use," articulating most eloquently an early assertion of Black Feminism.

**Black Feminism**
As the women's movement gained momentum in the early 1970s, many African-American women began to consider themselves excluded from it because it appeared to advocate rights important mostly to white women. They pointed out, for instance, that when suburban housewives spoke of wanting to do more than take care of their homes, they were ignoring the experiences of African-American women, most of whom already worked outside the home, as their mothers and grandmothers before them had. By the mid-1970s, many black women, including Walker, articulated a distinctly Arrican-American form of feminism that heralded the efforts of one's immediate matriarchal ancestors. Some of these concerns are addressed in "Everyday Use."

**Everyday Use: Critical Overview**

When "Everyday Use" appeared in a 1973 collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, reviewers of the book recognized the uniqueness of Alice Walker's portrayals of African-American women's experiences. Jerry H. Bryant, for instance, described Walker in *The Nation* as a writer "probing for the hitherto undisclosed alpha and beta rays of black existence." Critics also enthused over Walker's artistic abilities, most agreeing with Barbara Smith, who wrote in *Ms.* magazine that "Walker's perceptions, style, and artistry ... consistently ... make her work a treasure, particularly for those of us whom her work describes."

While "Everyday Use" was singled out for praise by several critics, it has since achieved great prominence within the opus of Walker's work. Several admiring articles have been written about it, and in 1994, Barbara Christian published *Everyday Use*, an entire book of essays built around this one story. As Christian wrote in the book's introduction, the story has come to be recognized as an exemplary, foundational piece for several of Walker's primary interests as a writer. She noted, for instance, that like many other works by Walker, it "placed African American women's voices at the center of the narrative, an unusual position at the time."

Telling African-American women's stones with honesty, and placing such previously unrecognized women on center stage to tell and act out their own stories, was a method Walker used to great success and acclaim in her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*. Thanks in large part to Walker (who in turn gives much of the credit to Zora Neale Hurston), this narrative method, exemplified in "Everyday Use," has since become a standard technique for many black women writers, including Gloria Naylor, Tom Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Toni Cade Bambara. The story's central symbol of quilting also resonates beyond the story itself. Gathering loose bits of material into beautiful, meaningful quilts has long been a form of African-American art, but as Walker realized, this and other forms of women's art have often been overlooked by the establishment. This short, rich story also announces Walker's response to her contemporaries' wish to speak for all blacks in African-nationalist terms: a viewpoint extremely popular in the early 1970s. As a writer with black feminist insight, Walker gives voice in this story "to an entire maternal ancestry often silenced by the political rhetoric of the period," quoted Christian. Finally, this story also stands out as an example of Walker's answer to many black intellectuals who have stressed the need to leave old, rural ways behind in order to improve their economic and political standing. Walker's depiction of the quiet dignity of Maggie and Mrs. Johnson has been recognized as an appreciation for what rural Southern black folk are, not what they should become. Much of Walker's critical acclaim focuses on the integrity she imparts to her characters, no matter what their circumstances.
The Quilting Metaphor in "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's early story "Everyday Use" is clustered around a central image: quilting and quilts. Her use of this metaphor is important to critics because she went on to develop the theme more fully in her later work, especially the novel *The Color Purple*. Simply put, the quilt is a metaphor for the ways in which discarded scraps and fragments may be made into a unified, even beautiful, whole. Quilting symbolizes the process out of which the unimportant and meaningless may be transformed into the valued and useful. Walker finds this metaphor especially useful for describing African-American women's lives, which traditional history and literature have often ignored and misrepresented.

Alice Walker is not the first to turn her attention to the importance of cloth making in women's culture. Women have been associated with textiles since the days of recorded history. Although weaving and sewing has often been mandatory labor, women have historically endowed their work with special meanings and significance. In classical mythology the fates were portrayed as women, but nearly all mythologies bear traces of the Triple Goddess as the three fates, rulers of past, present, and future. One type of goddesses spin time, another group measure it and weave events together, and yet another group cut off lengths of cloth. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus's wife Penelope uses her skill at the loom to keep suitors at bay until her husband returns.

Walker herself explained the significance of quilting (and gardening) to the collective lives of women, especially those of African-American women, in an essay written the year after "Everyday Use" was first published. In the essay titled "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker asks us to consider what would have become of black women artists who lived in slavery and oppression. Would they have been "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release"? Walker explains how she discovered her mothers' gardens, by which she means her creative female ancestors. Having looked "high when she should have been looking low," Walker discovers that "the answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it." When she sees a stunning quilt of the crucifixion hanging in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, and sees that it is credited only to "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama," she knows she is in the presence of "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use."

Critic Barbara Christian reads Walker's "Everyday Use" as a sort of fictional conclusion to the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Christian notes that Walker's major insight in the essay is her "illumination of the creative legacy of 'ordinary' black women of the South." Walker, according to Christian, does more than acknowledge that the quilts these women produced can be regarded as art; she is impressed "with their functional beauty and by the process that produced them." In other words, Walker is asking us to reconsider whether quilts can be counted as art. But more than that, Christian claims, she is also suggesting that the truly artistic objects may be those that have an everyday use. In "Everyday Use," Walker dramatizes the "use and misuse of the concept of heritage" using the quilt as unifying object and metaphor, and at the same time challenges our definitions of what counts as art in our culture.

The conflict between Maggie and Dee (or, Wangero, as she prefers to be called) is about whether heritage exists in things or in spirit, or process. Dee, who "at sixteen had a style of her own: and knew what style was," has recently returned to her black roots because they are fashionable. As Maggie and her mother watch warily, she goes around the house collecting objects from her heritage that she now sees as valuable. When she gets to the quilts a conflict arises. Her mother recalls that Dee had been offered a quilt when she went away to college, but had then declared it "old fashioned, out of style." Now however, her experience with the larger culture, with "words, lies, other folks' habits," gives her a frame within which to take possession of her own
heritage. Walker dramatizes this when Dee declares that she plans to hang, or frame, the quilts, "as though, the mother comments to herself, 'that was the only thing you could do with quilts.'" Dee seems to think that art is always something that comes in a frame.

Dee views her heritage as an artifact which she can possess and appreciate from a distance instead of as a process in which she is always intimately involved. Dee's notion of framing a quilt is in stark contrast to the frame on which the quilts had been made, according to the mother: "First they had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them." For Dee's mother and her mother and sister, the value of the quilt has to do at least in part with the communal nature of its making. For the women who are, in Houston Baker's and Charlotte Pierce-Baker's words, "accustomed to living and working with fragments," the scraps and patches handed down through the generations and stitched into a meaningful and beautiful whole have a value all their own that Dee cannot even approximate when she declares them "priceless."

According to Dee, Maggie's problem is that she does not understand her "heritage," and as a consequence she will never make anything of herself. Maggie may not understand what Dee means by "heritage," but she "knows how to quilt," and furthermore she "can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts." Unlike her sister who is dressed in an outfit made out of whole cloth that is so loud it hurts her mother's eyes, Maggie's own scarred body resembles the faded patches of the quilt, where stitching resembles healing. She is literally making something of herself every day, just as she and her mother make things every day. Baker and Pierce-Baker call Maggie "the arisen goddess of Walker's story... the sacred figure who bears the scarifications of experience and knows how to convert patches into robustly patterned and beautifully quilted wholes." Dee's final dismissal of her sister—"She'll probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use"—is meant to sway the mother to her side. Instead, her mother suddenly sees through Dee's artistic frames, and contemptuously calling her "Miss Wangero," snatchas the quilts from her hands. She recognizes that like Maggie and herself, "quilts are designed for everyday use, pieced wholes defying symmetry and pattern,... signs of the sacred generations of women who have always been alien to a world of literate words and stylish fancy" (Baker and Pierce-Baker). Dee's final gesture is to put on a pair of sunglasses "that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin," which suggests that despite this lesson in what heritage really means, she will continue to see the world through the frames she chooses.

For Barbara Christian as well as Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, the mother's recognition of Maggie's connection to quilts and to quilting is crucial to the story. The mother's choice of Maggie over "Miss Wangero" signifies Walker's discovery of her own literary ancestor, thus writing in fiction a conclusion to the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Baker and Pierce-Baker argue that when Maggie finally smiles "a real smile" at the end of the story as she and her mother watch Dee's car disappear in a cloud of dust, it is because she knows her "mother's holy recognition of the scarred daughter's sacred status as quilter is the best gift of a hard-pressed womankind to the fragmented goddess of the present."

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for Short Stories for Students, Gale Research, 1997. Piedmont-Marton is a professor of English and the coordinator of the writing center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'

Commentaries on Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" typically center on Mama's awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage. Most readers agree that when Mama takes the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie, she confirms her younger daughter's self-worth: metaphorically, she gives Maggie her voice. Elaine Hedges, for example, refers to the "reconciliation scene" in which "Mama's gift of the family quilts to Maggie empowers the previously silenced and victimized
daughter." The text underscores such a reading by stating that immediately after the incident Maggie sits with her "mouth open."

This story is distinctive, however, in that Walker stresses not only the importance of language but also the destructive effects of its misuse. Clearly, Dee privileges language over silence, as she demonstrates in her determination to be educated and in the importance she places on her name. Rather than providing a medium for newfound awareness and for community, however, verbal skill equips Dee to oppress and manipulate others and to isolate herself; when she lived at home, she read to her sister and mother "without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice." Mama recalls that Dee "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." Dee uses words to wash, burn, press, and shove. We are told that the "nervous girls" and "furtive boys" whom she regarded as her friends "worshiped the well-turned phrase" and her "scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye."

It is not surprising, then, that Mama, mistrustful of language, expresses herself in the climactic scene of the story not through words but through deeds: she hugs Maggie to her, drags her in the room where Dee sits holding the quilts, snatchesthe quilts from Dee, and dumps them into Maggie's lap. Only as an afterthought does she speak at all, telling Dee to "take one or two of the others." Mama's actions, not her words, silence the daughter who has, up to this point, used language to control others and separate herself from the community: Mama tells us that Dee turns and leaves the room "without a word."

In much of Walker's work, a character's dawning sense of self is represented not only by the acquisition of an individual voice but also through integration into a community. Mama's new appreciation of Maggie is significant because it represents the establishment of a sisterhood between mother and daughter. Just before taking the quilts out of Dee's hands, Mama tells us, "I did something I never had done before." The "something" to which she refers is essentially two actions: Mama embraces Maggie and says "no" to Dee for the first time. Since we are told that she held Maggie when she was burned in the fire, and since Mama's personality suggests that she would most likely hug her daughter often. She is of course referring not merely to the literal hug but to the first spiritual embrace, representing her decision no longer to judge her younger daughter by the shallow standards Dee embodies—criteria that Mama has been using to measure both Maggie and herself up until the climax of the story. When Mama acts on Maggie's behalf, she is responding to the largely nonverbal message that her younger daughter has been sending for some time, but which Mama herself has been unable fully to accept. Now Maggie and Mama are allied in their rejection of Dee's attempts to devalue their lifestyle, and their new sense of community enables Maggie to smile "a real smile, not scared." Significantly, the story ends with the two of them sitting in silence, "just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed."

Ultimately, however, Mama has the last word; it is she, after all, who tells the story. Yet her control over the text is won gradually. Walker employs an unusual narrative structure to parallel Mama's development as she strengthens her voice and moves toward community with Maggie. Rather than reporting the entire event in retrospect, Mama relates the first half of the story as it occurs, using present and future tenses up until the moment Dee announces her new name. The commentary that Mama makes about herself and Maggie in the first portion of the story is therefore made before the awakening that she undergoes during the quilt episode—before she is able to reject completely Dee's desire that she and Maggie be something that they are not. Prior to the encounter with Dee over the quilts, although Mama at times speaks sarcastically about Dee's selfish attitude, she nonetheless dreams repeatedly of appearing on a television program "the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake," wielding a "quick and witty tongue." Mama's distaste for Dee's egotism is tempered by her desire to be respected by her daughter. In part, then, Mama has come to define herself in terms of her failure to meet the standards of what Lindsey Tucker calls a "basically white middle-class identity"—the white-male-dominated system portrayed in

Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'
the television show. When Mama holds up her own strengths next to those valued by Dee and the white Johnny Carson society, she sees herself as one poised always in a position of fear, "with one foot raised in flight."... 

The subsequent action of the story, however, in no way supports Mama's reading of her younger daughter. Instead, Maggie's behavior—even her limited use of language—conveys disgust with her sister rather than envy and awe. She responds to Hakim-a-barber, to Dee's hair, and to the discussion over the name "Dee" with the guttural "uhnnh," a sound of revulsion. Even prior to Dee's arrival, when Mama recalls [Dee's] vow never to bring any friends home with her lest she be embarrassed, Maggie questions, "Mama, when did Dee ever have any friends? " She further reveals her distaste for Dee not by standing hopelessly, as her mother had predicted, but by acting decisively: she pulls away when Hakim-a-barber tries to hug her; she acts uninterested, her hand "limp as a fish," when he tries to teach her an unfamiliar handshake; and when she hears Dee asking for the quilts that are hers by right, she drops something noisily in the kitchen and slams the door. Whereas her mother describes Maggie as "cowering behind me," Maggie's first remarks are unsolicited, direct, and informed: "Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash. ... His name was Henry, but they called him Stash." Her mother's observation that Maggie's voice was "so low you almost couldn't hear her" merely amplifies the vast difference between Dee's aggressive, oppressive, self-seeking use of words and Maggie's calm, selective, community-building use of language.

The story shifts abruptly to the past tense immediately after Dee declares that she has changed her name. Up until now, Mama has been caught in the tension between her annoyance with Dee and her instinctive desire to be "the way my daughter would want me to be." Yet when Dee goes so far as to disown her family identity, Mama reaches a watershed. As Hirsch explains, Mama has previously been unable to express her anger at Dee, but now her older daughter has pushed her too far; now she is able to objectify the situation, to distance herself from it. The use of present-tense verbs in the first half of the story suggests less narrative authority: if Mama is telling the events as they happen, she is merely reacting. By shifting to the past tense, Walker strengthens Mama's voice, giving her more control. That the tense shift is subtle—it is buried in the very center of the story, in the middle of a conversation—underscores the fact that although Mama has crossed an important line, she is as yet unable fully to recognize or articulate her new position. As the story moves toward the turning point, however, she gains increasing emotional distance from Dee and is ultimately able to tell her "no."

Until midway through the story, Dee's abuse of language appears to have successfully undermined the hierarchy privileging language over silence in most of Walker's works. Walker, however, cleverly derails Dee's efforts to subvert language by giving Mama more narrative control as the story unfolds—authority that she uses to affirm her allegiance to Maggie and to assert her emotional freedom from Dee. In the final paragraph of the story, Dee is not mentioned by name at all. Instead, Mama mentions only "the sunglasses," which she and Maggie find amusing, and the "car dust," which settles as Dee rides away. Maggie, on the other hand, is mentioned twice by name and is referred to a third time when Mama describes the two of them sitting together on the porch. Dee's absence in the final lines contrasts with her overbearing presence in the beginning of Mama's story, when she says, "I will wait for her" and "Maggie will be nervous." Indeed, in the end, Dee's oppressive voice is mute, for Mama has narrated her out of the story altogether.


**Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"**
A patch is a fragment. It is a vestige of wholeness that stands as a sign of loss and a challenge to creative design. As a remainder or remnant, the patch may symbolize rupture and impoverishment; it may be defined by the faded glory of the already gone. But as a fragment, it is also rife with explosive potential of the yet-to-be-discovered. Like woman, it is a liminal element between wholes.

Weaving, shaping, sculpting, or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos. Such activity represents a nonce response to ceaseless scattering; it constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal. A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora.

Traditional African cultures were scattered by the European slave trade throughout the commercial time and space of the New World. The transmutation of quilting, a European, feminine tradition, into a black women's folk art, represents an innovative fusion of African cloth manufacture, piecing, and appliqué with awesome New World experiences—and expediencies. The product that resulted was, in many ways, a double patch. The hands that pieced the master's rigidly patterned quilts by day were often the hands that crafted a more functional design in slave cabins by night. The quilts of Afro-America offer a *sui generis* context (a weaving together) of experiences and a storied, vernacular representation of lives conducted in the margins, ever beyond an easy and acceptable wholeness. In many ways, the quilts of Afro-America resemble the work of all those dismembered gods who transmute fragments and remainders into the light and breath of a new creation. And the sorority of quiltmakers, fragment weavers, holy patchers, possesses a sacred wisdom that it hands down from generation to generation to those who refuse the center for the ludic and unconfined spaces of the margins....

The Johnson women, who populate the generations represented in Walker's short story "Everyday Use," are inhabitants of southern cabins who have always worked with "scraps" and seen what they could make of them. The result of their labor has been a succession of mothers and daughters surviving the ignominies of Jim Crow life and passing on ancestral blessings to descendants. The guardians of the Johnson homestead when the story commences are the mother—"a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands"—and her daughter Maggie, who has remained with her "chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground" ten or twelve years ago. The mood at the story's beginning is one of ritualistic "waiting": "I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon." The subject awaited is the other daughter, Dee. Not only has the yard (as ritual ground) been prepared for the arrival of a goddess, but the sensibilities and costumes of Maggie and her mother have been appropriately attuned for the occasion. The mother daydreams of television shows where parents and children are suddenly—and pleasantly—reunited, banal shows where chatty hosts oversee tearful reunions. In her fantasy, she weighs a hundred pounds less, is several shades brighter in complexion, and possesses a devastatingly quick tongue. She returns abruptly to real life meditation, reflecting on her own heroic, agrarian accomplishments in slaughtering hogs and cattle and preparing their meat for winter nourishment. She is a robust provider who has gone to the people of her church and raised money to send her light-complexioned, lithe-figured, and ever-dissatisfied daughter Dee to college. Today, as she waits in the purified yard, she notes the stark differences between Maggie and Dee and recalls how the "last dingy gray board of the house [fell] in toward the red-hot brick chimney" when her former domicile burned. Maggie was scarred horribly by the fire, but Dee, who had hated the house with an intense fury, stood "off under the sweet gum tree ... a look of concentration on her face." A scarred and dull Maggie, who has been kept at home and confined to everyday offices, has but one reaction to the fiery and vivacious arrival of her sister: "I hear Maggie suck in her breath. 'Uhhnnh,' is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. 'Uhhnnh....'"

The dramatic conflict of the story surrounds the definition of holiness. The ritual purification of earth and expectant atmosphere akin to that of Beckett's famous drama ("I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I
made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon.") prepare us for the narrator's epiphanic experience at the story's conclusion.

Near the end of "Everyday Use," the mother (who is the tale's narrator) realizes that Dee (a.k.a., Wangero) is a fantasy child, a perpetrator and victim of: "words, lies, other folks' habits." The energetic daughter is as frivolously careless of other peoples' lives as the fiery conflagration that she had watched ten years previously. Assured by the makers of American fashion that "black" is currently "beautiful," she has confirmed her own "style" to that notion. Hers is a trendy "blackness" cultivated as "art" and costume. She wears "a dress down to the ground...bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits." And she says of quilts she has removed from a trunk at the foot of her mother's bed: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts! She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use." "Art" is, thus, juxtaposed with "everyday use" in Walker's short story, and the fire goddess Dee, who has achieved literacy only to burn "us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know," is revealed as a perpetrator of institutional theories of aesthetics. (Such theories hold that "art" is, in fact, defined by social institutions such as museums, book reviews, and art dealers.) Of the two quilts that she has extracted from the trunk, she exclaims: "But they're 'priceless.'" And so the quilts are by "fashionable" standards of artistic value, standards that motivate the answer that Dee provides to her mother's question: "'Well,' I said, stumped. 'What would you do with them?'" Dee's answer: 'Hang them.' The stylish daughter's entire life has been one of "framed" experience; she has always sought a fashionably "aesthetic" distance from southern expediencies. (And how unlike quilt frames that signal social activity and a coming to completeness are her frames.) Her concentrated detachment from the fire, which so nearly symbolizes her role vis-à-vis the Afro-American community (her black friends "worshipped ... the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye") is characteristic of her attitude. Her goals include the appropriation of exactly what she needs to remain fashionable in the eyes of a world of pretended wholeness, a world of banal television shows, framed and institutionalized art, and Polaroid cameras—devices that instantly process and record experience as "framed" photograph. Ultimately, the framed Polaroid photograph represents the limits of Dee's vision....

What is at stake in the world of Walker's short story, then, is not the prerogatives of Afro-American women as "wayward artists." Individualism and a flouting of convention in order to achieve "artistic" success constitute acts of treachery in "Everyday Use." For Dee, if she is anything, is a fashionable denizen of America's art/fantasy world. She is removed from the "everyday uses" of a black community that she scorns, misunderstands, burns. Certainly, she is "unconventionally" black. As such, however, she is an object of holy contempt from the archetypal weaver of black wholeness from tattered fragments. Maggie's "Uhnnnh" and her mother's designation "Miss Wangero" are gestures of utter contempt. Dee's sellout to fashion and fantasy in a television-manipulated world of "artistic" frames is a representation of the complicity of the clerks. Not "art," then, but use or function is the signal in Walker's fiction of sacred creation.

Quilts designed for everyday use, pieced wholes defying symmetry and pattern, are signs of the scarred generations of women who have always been alien to a world of literate words and stylish fantasies. The crafted fabric of Walker's story is the very weave of blues and jazz traditions in the Afro-American community, daringly improvisational modes that confront breaks in the continuity of melody (or theme) by riffing. The asymmetrical quilts of southern black women are like the off-centered stomping of the jazz solo or the innovative musical showmanship of the blues interlude. They speak a world in which the deceptively shuffling Maggie is capable of a quick change into goddess, an unlikely holy figure whose dues are paid in full. Dee's anger at her mother is occasioned principally by the mother's insistence that paid dues make Maggie a more likely bearer of sacredness, tradition, and true value than the "brighter" sister. "You just don't understand," she says to her mother. Her assessment is surely correct where institutional theories and systems of "art" are concerned. The mother's cognition contains no categories for framed art. The mother works according to an entirely different scale of use and value, finally assigning proper weight to the virtues of Maggie and to the ancestral importance of the pieced quilts that she has kept out of use for so many years. Smarting, perhaps, from Dee's designation of the quilts as "old-fashioned," the mother has buried the covers
away in a trunk. At the end of Walker's story, however, she has become aware of her own mistaken value judgments, and she pays homage that is due to Maggie. The unlikely daughter is a *griot* of the vernacular who remembers actors and events in a distinctively black "historical" drama.

But the larger appeal of "Everyday Use" is its privileging of a distinctively woman's craft as the signal mode of confronting chaos through a skillful blending of patches. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's skill as a fabric worker completely transmutes the order of Afro-American existence. Not only do her talents with a needle enable her to wear the pants in the family, they also allow her to become the maker of pants par excellence. Hence, she becomes a kind of unifying goddess of patch and stitch, an instrucress of mankind who bestows the gift of consolidating fragments. Her abusive husband Albert says: "When I was growing up ... I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it." "Well," says Celie, "nobody gon laugh at you now.... Here, help me stitch in these pockets."

A formerly "patched" separateness of woman is transformed through fabric craft into a new unity. Quilting, sewing, stitching are bonding activities that begin with the godlike authority and daring of women, but that are given (as a gift toward community) to men. The old disparities are transmuted into a vision best captured by the scene that Shug suggests to Celie: "But, Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns." The heavenly city of quilted design is a form of unity wrested by the sheer force of the woman quiltmaker's will from chaos. As a community, it stands as both a sign of the potential effects of black women's creativity in America, and as an emblem of the effectiveness of women's skillful confrontation of patches. Walker's achievement as a southern, black, woman novelist is her own successful application of the holy patching that was a staple of her grandmother's and great-grandmother's hours of everyday ritual. "Everyday Use" is, not surprisingly, dedicated to "your grandmama": to those who began the line of converting patches into works of southern genius.


**Everyday Use: Compare and Contrast**

1971: The Supreme Court upholds busing students to various schools in order for them to achieve greater racial integration.

1995: Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam leads the Million Man March in Washington, DC, as a show of solidarity and an opportunity for black men to publicly declare their support for family values.

1974: A black militant organization called the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnap heiress Patty Hearst, forces her to rob a bank, and commits several other crimes.

1996: Drive-by shootings spurred by gang rivalries claim the lives of African-American musicians Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.

1973: Census bureau statistics place the poverty rate for a family of two at $2,984 per year.

1995: The poverty threshold for a family of two is $10,259 per year.

**Everyday Use: Topics for Further Study**

Walker has often been considered a black feminist writer. Does this story have a feminist message? If so, is the message any different than a similar message would be if written by a white feminist writer?
Dee and Maggie seem as different as night and day. Do either of them have any character traits in common with their mother? If so, what are these traits? What traits don't they share with their mother?

Consider Walker's portrayal of poverty in the story. Are there areas of the country where people live in similar conditions today? Where are they, and who lives there?

**Everyday Use: What Do I Read Next?**

*The Color Purple*, Walker's novel about black women who persevere despite oppression by society and abuse by the men in their lives, established the author as a voice of 1970s black feminist ideals.

*Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison offers a counterpart to "Everyday Use" but with a male point of view. Through a series of encounters with friends and relatives, Macon ("Milkman") Dead III learns the value of the past and the importance of human connections.

*The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor tells the story of seven African-American women who live on a dead-end urban street. Though their lives are often painful, they maintain their spiritual strength and use it to strengthen their community.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965, co-written with Alex Haley) was a cornerstone of the Black Power Movement, whose ideals Dee Johnson and Hakim-a-barber espouse. Malcolm X examines his early life as a hustler, defends his controversial social and political ideals, and explains his conversion to the Islamic faith.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance who was rediscovered and popularized by Walker, is the story of one black woman's effort to claim her own sense of independence.

**Everyday Use: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**


**Further Reading**

An interview with Walker conducted near the time in which she wrote "Everyday Use."


Excerpted criticism of Walker's short fiction.

Everyday Use: Topics for Further Study

15
This book offers an overview of Walker's life and career, including explanatory chapters on each of her works. The third chapter contains analysis of the stories in the collection in which "Everyday Use" first appeared.

**Everyday Use: Pictures**

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