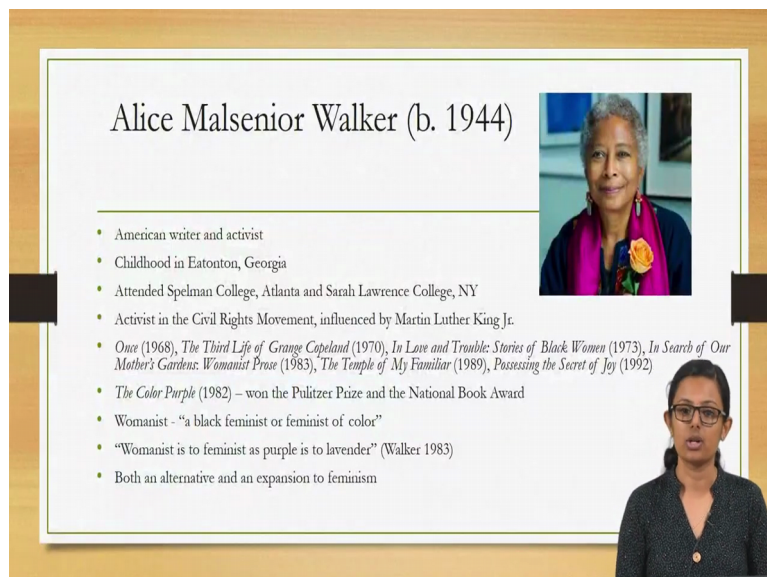
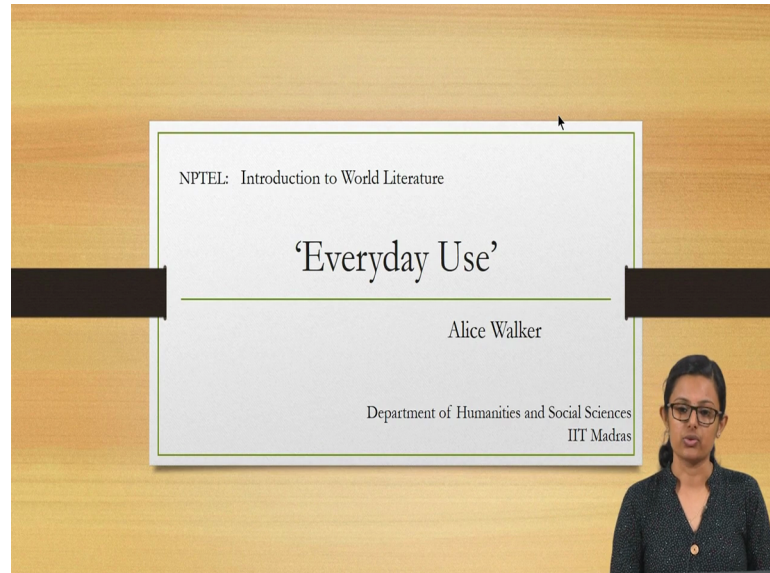


Introduction to World Literature
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Everyday Use

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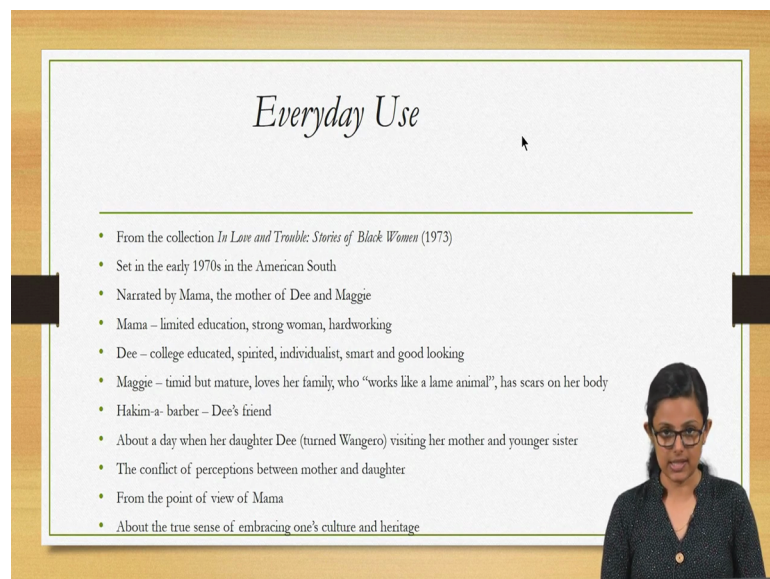


Welcome to yet another session of introduction to world literature. Today we will be reading the short story, 'Everyday Use' by Alice Walker. Now, Alice Walker, she is an American writer and activist, born in 1944 in Georgia in the US. She attended the Spelman College Atlanta and Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She was very much influenced by Martin Luther King Jr. and under this influence she became an activist in the civil rights movement. During her college days itself, she was into writing and some of her popular works include the *Once*, which is 1st collection of poetry, which was published in 1968.

Her 1st novel is *The 3rd Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970 and other popular works include *In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women*, arguably how most popular work will be done well, *The Colour Purple*, which came out in 1982. And for this particular novel, she won both, the Pulitzer prize and the National book award. And she has written a very popular collection of essays *In Search of a Mother's Garden*, *Womanist Prose* and it is in this particular work that she coined the term womanist and she defines a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of colour.

And according to her, a woman is to feminist as purple to lavender. Now, why she coins this particular concept woman is, is that she felt that you know feminism mostly dealt with the issues faced by the white women and through womanism she is trying to build visibility the problems faced by black women and also to counter the kind of stereotypes that was being represented about the black women. So to shatter those stereotypes and giving voice to them and breaking their issues to the light, was what she purported to do when she coined this concept of womanism.

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Everyday Use

- From the collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973)
- Set in the early 1970s in the American South
- Narrated by Mama, the mother of Dee and Maggie
- Mama – limited education, strong woman, hardworking
- Dee – college educated, spirited, individualist, smart and good looking
- Maggie – timid but mature, loves her family, who “works like a lame animal”, has scars on her body
- Hakim-a-barber – Dee’s friend
- About a day when her daughter Dee (turned Wangero) visiting her mother and younger sister
- The conflict of perceptions between mother and daughter
- From the point of view of Mama
- About the true sense of embracing one’s culture and heritage

A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark top, speaking.

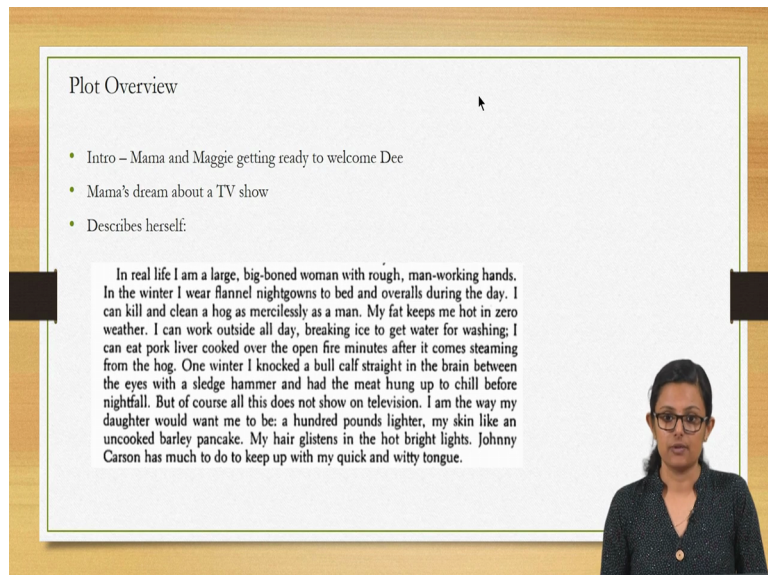
She was also after her graduation she has been active participant in welfare Department of the New York City, she has also worked for the advancement of the black people in Mississippi region. So, today will be reading and discussing her short story everyday use. And this particular story is from the collection *In Love and Trouble, Stories of Black Women*, which came out in 1973. Now stories is set in the early 1970s in the American South. There are 3 principal characters, a mother, who is referred to in the story as Mamma and her 2 daughters Dee and Maggi.

So the entire story deals with a day's event, what happens in a day, when the elder daughter Dee comes home to visit her mother and younger sister and what happens during this particular day. The entire story is narrated from the point of view of Mamma and she is an educated black woman, and she describes this day's events from her point of view. No talk about the 2 daughters, Dee is the elder one, she is the one who has been highly educated and she has gone to school with the funds raised both by her mother as well as by the Church.

And she is a very confident, strong spirited girl and compared to her younger sibling, Dee is a better looking, good-looking girl. On the other hand, Maggie is not as educated as Dee, she is not as confident as she, as Dee, and she is very shy, she is timid. But she loves her family so much and she works like a lame animal and she is not as good looking as Dee, she has scars on her body from burning instance when her home was burned down. And there is another minor character also appearing in the story and that is Hakim Barber, who is Dee's friend.

Through the concept of the assumptions or the points of view of these 2 characters, the mother and the daughter Dee, Walker is trying to present us with the question of what it means to truly understand and embrace one's culture and one's heritage.

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Plot Overview

- Intro – Mama and Maggie getting ready to welcome Dee
- Mama's dream about a TV show
- Describes herself:

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

Now we will go to the plot overview of the story. As the story opens, we find Mamma and Maggie getting ready to welcome Dee, they are preparing the home. And Mamma begins giving us a description of herself as well as of both the daughters. So she imagines about this popular Tonight show hosted by Johnny Carson and she has a dream, what if it was Dee a daughter was the guest on this particular TV show and if she has to make an appearance on

this show, would there be this happy run of the mother and daughter happening and then she realises that she is acting like the people who appear on the television screen.

And this is her description about herself from the story I read. In real life I am a large big old woman with rough, man working hands. In the winter I wears flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. My fat keeps me hot in 0 weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ties to get water for washing. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be, a 100 pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake, he replaces in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue. So this contrast between how she would have to look like if she has to appear on a TV show like this along with her daughter.

And the way she actually looks like Brings in the contrast between the stereotypical representation of a black woman and what she, the kind of innovation that she feels in front of her educated daughter Dee. Because in front of her daughter, she feels she is not as good looking and she may not be presentable on a television show. But remember she does not feel apologetic at all about her looks, she is quite confident and happy about the fact that she has a very strong body and she can work like a man because she is the sole breadwinner of the family.

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- Mama's memory of their old house being burnt down
- How much Dee hated their old house:

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. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much.
- About Dee

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own; and knew what style was.

Moving on she continues her recollections and one specific memory that she has about her family is a set of their old house being burnt down. And this particular memory has a very important role to play in the narrative because you get to see a stark contrast between the 2

daughters Dee and Maggie through this particular incidence. The description is like this in the story. Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me. Her hair smoking at her dress falling off, her in little black pepper flakes.

And Dee, I see her standing under the sweetgum tree, low-cost concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy grey board of the house fall in toward the redhot brick chimney. I had wanted to ask her why do you, why do not you dance around the Ashes. She had hated the house that much. There are 2 different responses to this particular incident from Maggie and Dee. Maggie was complete Saturday and she was scared about their old house being burnt down, on the other hand you find Dee absolutely happy with the fact that this old house had burned down.

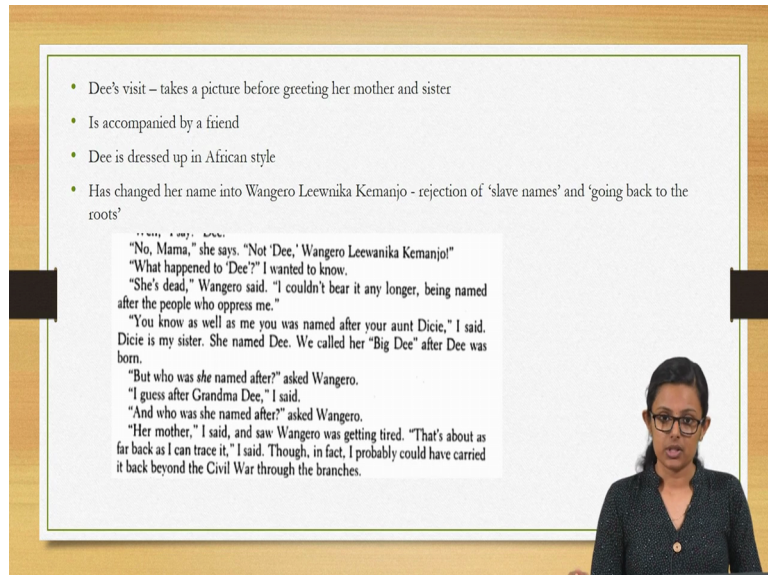
So it is through these kind of incidents or these anecdotes that Mamma tries to give us, Mamma presents to us the contrast between these 2 daughters. Dee is someone who is not very emotionally attached to the family and neither to her mother, nor to her younger daughter, sorry, neither to her mother nor to her sister, whereas Maggie was the one who was emotionally attached to her mother and her family as such and to her home also. And Dee on the other hand always tries to present herself as a better woman because she was the one who received education.

So this is a description from the text. Dee wanted nice things, a yellow or candy dress to wear to her graduation from high school, she was determined to stand down and disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At 16 she had a style of her own and she knew what style was. So, she never tried to associate herself with anything that was remotely, even remotely associated to her black familial background.

She always wanted good things to happen to her, she knew she was beautiful and she had a style of herself, on the other hand you see Mamma as well as Maggie, there is a sense of inhibition or they are intimidated by the presence of Dee. Nobody could even say no to her, she always made it a point that whatever she wanted in her life, what happened to her. And all those things would be good things too. So it was her mother and the church that helped her go to school and later to college, but she made it a point that she does not want to even bring her friend's home.

She does not want, she did not want anybody to get to know about her familial background. She was quite arrest by the fact that she came up, she was from a black family. So, these are the kind of descriptions in the opening part of the story. And now as we move to the 2nd part of the story, which is when Dee actually comes home.

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- Dee's visit – takes a picture before greeting her mother and sister
- Is accompanied by a friend
- Dee is dressed up in African style
- Has changed her name into Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo - rejection of 'slave names' and 'going back to the roots'

... ..

"No, Mama," she says. "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"

"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."

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee," I said.

"And who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"Her mother," I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. "That's about as far back as I can trace it," I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

So as Dee comes home, from this particular visit wicket to know that there is much of a transformation that has happened in Dee. She comes home and there is a friend who accompanies her. We do not exactly know who this person is, he might be her friend or his boyfriend or might be her husband because her mother Mamma is even scared to ask her who this person actually is. And she is quite startled to see Dee, because there is a change, a complete transformation even in her appearance.

She is wearing a very bright coloured dress , it is full of orange and yellow and her hair style is different, she is wearing very big accessories and it reminds us of an African style. So she is trying to emulate an African style in her dressing and in her appearance. And away before gritting her mother and sister, what she does is, she forces them onto a chair and she immediately takes a picture of mother and Maggie sitting with home also coming in the frame. And it is only after taking this picture that she even things to she plans to hug her and greet her.

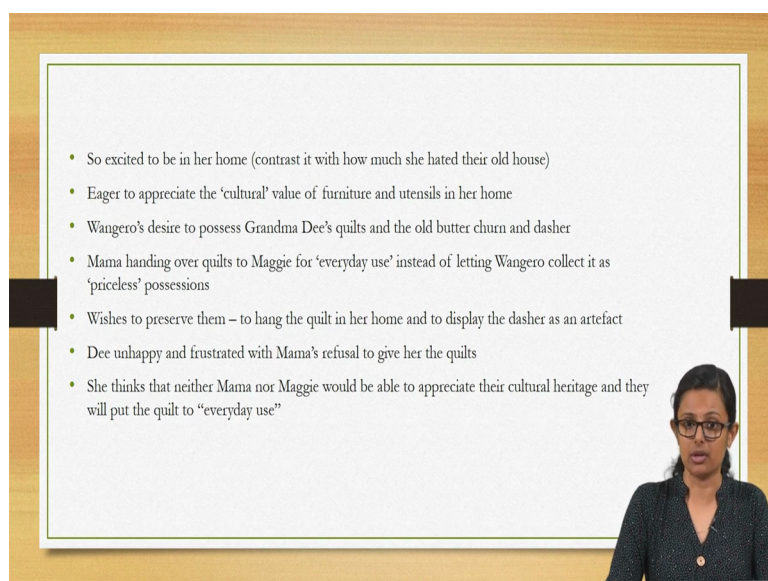
And as her mother calls are Dee, she says, that she is no longer Dee and she has changed her name to Wangera sorry Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, because she wanted to reject her slave name. So, through this actual coming, with the actual introduction of Dee into the story, we

get to know, we, the author tries to present us with certain hints and clues regarding what kind of a transformation is going on in Dee. She had gone to the city for education and she is now clearly under the influence of the popular black power movement and the black cultural nationalist movement, that was at its high point during the early 70s.

So, this is what she says when she meets her mother. No, Mamma she says. Not Dee, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. What happened to Dee, I wanted to know. She is dead, I could not bear it any longer being named after the people who oppress me. So, now that she is under the influence of black cultural nationalist or the black power movement, which was of the belief that we have to go back to the African, proper African heritage and culture. So under the influence of the Black cultural nationalist movement and the Black Power movement, which was of the opinion or their ideology was that you have to revive your black heritage and go back to the roots.

And that is the way to react and resist the oppression by the whites. So as a result of this, there was this popular fashion of getting back to African culture, not only in your dressing and your sartorial codes, even by adopting what seemed to be African names. So, clearly Dee is also under this particular influence and that is why she believes she is named after the white people who oppressed and therefore she wants to reject it. But it is her mother who tries to remind her that it is, she is not named after any white people, rather she is named after her own aunt, who is Dicie and this aunt was named after their grandmother Dee.

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The slide contains a list of seven bullet points summarizing key events and themes from the story. A woman with glasses and a dark top is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide frame.

- So excited to be in her home (contrast it with how much she hated their old house)
- Eager to appreciate the 'cultural' value of furniture and utensils in her home
- Wangero's desire to possess Grandma Dee's quilts and the old butter churn and dasher
- Mama handing over quilts to Maggie for 'everyday use' instead of letting Wangero collect it as 'priceless' possessions
- Wishes to preserve them – to hang the quilt in her home and to display the dasher as an artefact
- Dee unhappy and frustrated with Mama's refusal to give her the quilts
- She thinks that neither Mama nor Maggie would be able to appreciate their cultural heritage and they will put the quilt to "everyday use"

So, this is a name that runs in her family. But she is absolutely ignorant of this fact and she considers Dee as, only as a white name. Now again, the difference is, remember earlier from whatever Mamma had described in the story, in the early part of the story, we get to know that Dee is somebody who is never interested in familial background in the Black Heritage or in her black roots. She was someone who always wants to distance or detach herself from all these things. But once she comes back home, she is all the more excited about her family and everything that is attached to their black cultural heritage.

So, inside the home she is excited to see everything, every piece of furniture and everyplace of artefact that she finds in her home. She is eager to appreciate the cultural value of the furniture and the utensils in the home and she gets hold of butter churner and the dasher and she is quite happy of the fact that was made, handmade or handcrafted by her uncle from a wood that, from a tree that was right outside their home. And she is quite excited to remember that the bench that is there near the dining table was actually made by her own father.

So, when she appreciates all these things in her mind, Mamma is thinking about how difficult it was for them to afford to buy a chair that there were forced to make these pieces of furniture on their own. But unfortunately what happens is Dee is not able to appreciate the personal memories that is attached to all these things. Rather she is only looking at the shallow cultural value that she tries to impose on all these things. And this kind of excitement about the artifacts and pieces of furniture in the home continues to the extent that she goes to her mother's room and gets hold the quilts made by her grandmother from an old trunk box.

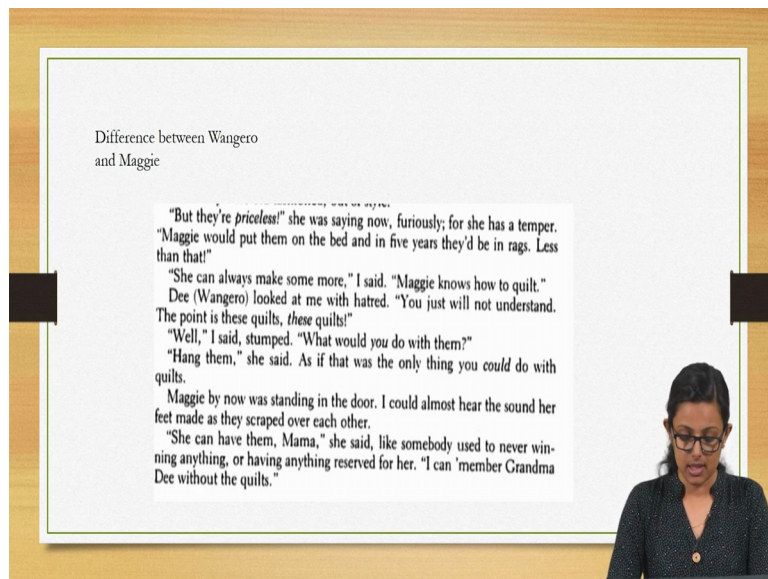
This is one point where the shift in the story happens, because till then you find Dee being the strong position and the strong voiced individualist person in the story. And till then Mamma and Maggie are silenced figures, they do not even dare to speak in front of Dee, they are absolutely scared of her, they feel intimidated in front of her. But now at this point there is a shift in the power position and when Dee gets hold of these quilts, she expresses the wish to take these also back with her to her home in the city.

So her plan is to take the dasher, so that it can become a curio or an artefact, a centrepiece for her table and she hopes to, she wants the grandmothers quilts so that she can also put this as display items in her home. This disappoints and this annoys Mamma very much because she had planned to give these 2 quilts to the younger daughter Maggie because she is soon to get

married. So, these quilts might be of use to Maggie. And there is no rhyme or logic according to Mamma in simply putting them as display pieces in a home.

So this kind of creates a conflict between the 2, this time unlike the previous times when she could get all the things that she wanted in her life. For the 1st time, Mamma rejects her wish and says that she forcefully takes the quilts back and wishes to give it to Maggie. And this is a conversation that happened for the quilts.

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Difference between Wangero and Maggie

"But they're *priceless*!" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper. "Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

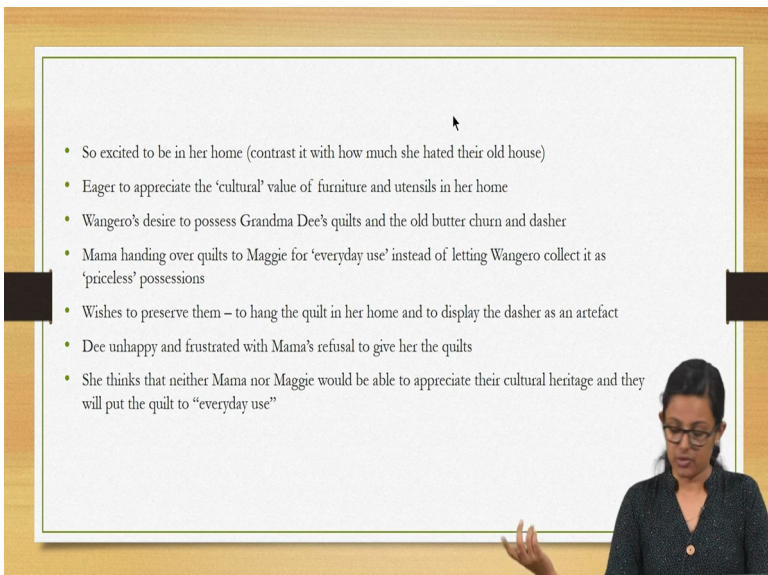
Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, *these* quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would you do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."



- So excited to be in her home (contrast it with how much she hated their old house)
- Eager to appreciate the 'cultural' value of furniture and utensils in her home
- Wangero's desire to possess Grandma Dee's quilts and the old butter churn and dasher
- Mama handing over quilts to Maggie for 'everyday use' instead of letting Wangero collect it as 'priceless' possessions
- Wishes to preserve them – to hang the quilt in her home and to display the dasher as an artefact
- Dee unhappy and frustrated with Mama's refusal to give her the quilts
- She thinks that neither Mama nor Maggie would be able to appreciate their cultural heritage and they will put the quilt to "everyday use"

And Wangero says, they are priceless, she is saying now, furiously, for she has a temper. Maggie would put them on the bed and in 5 years they would be in rags. Less than that. She can always make some more I said. Maggie knows how to quilt. Dee looked at me with hatred. You will just not understand the point is in these quilts, these quilts. Well, what would

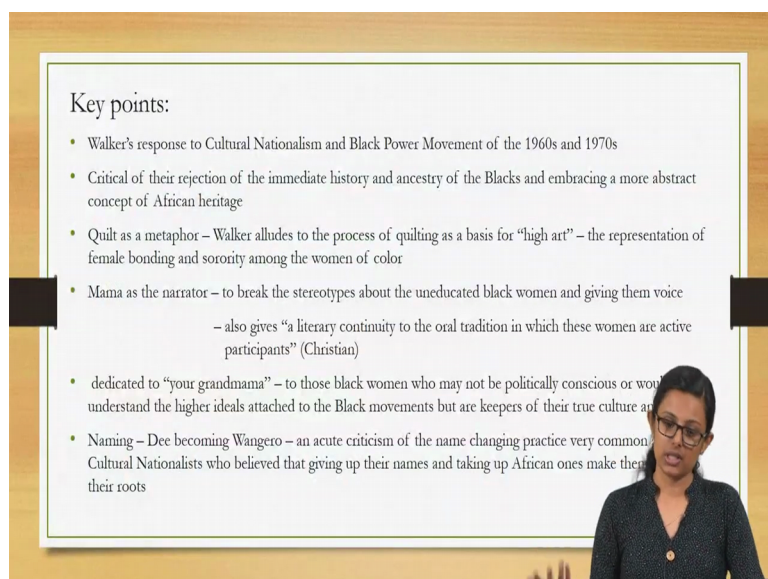
you do with them? Hang them, as if that was the only thing you could do with the quilts. Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound she made with her feet as they scraped over each other.

She can have them she said like somebody used to never win anything or have anything reserved for her. I can remember Grandma Dee without the quilts. Now, here we see the difference in attitude of both the daughters, Maggie and Dee. On the one hand when Dee is trying to forcefully take these quilts to make it as a cultural artefact as a display piece in her home, Maggie is able to realise the value of it. She knows that it is, it is dear to her but she is ready to give it to her because she knows how to quilt.

Even without these quilts, she can remember her grandmother, because the art of quilting, which her grandmother had taught to her aunt Dee, that aunt Dee had taught it to Maggie. So she knows how to remember her grandmother even without really needing those quilts. So, this disappoints Dee because it is for the 1st time that she does not get something that she actually wants. And with this disappointment and anger, she goes back and she remembers, she tries to remind them or tries to advise Maggie as well as mother to at least be politically aware.

Be conscious of what you actually are, be, try to press your culture and heritage because you are absolutely unaware of all these things, you are not able to appreciate the culture and value of all the artifacts that is at home. And she also tells Maggie to be a little more independent and to be like her. And that is how she leaves the home.

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Key points:

- Walker's response to Cultural Nationalism and Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s
- Critical of their rejection of the immediate history and ancestry of the Blacks and embracing a more abstract concept of African heritage
- Quilt as a metaphor – Walker alludes to the process of quilting as a basis for “high art” – the representation of female bonding and sorority among the women of color
- Mama as the narrator – to break the stereotypes about the uneducated black women and giving them voice
 - also gives “a literary continuity to the oral tradition in which these women are active participants” (Christian)
- dedicated to “your grandmama” – to those black women who may not be politically conscious or would not understand the higher ideals attached to the Black movements but are keepers of their true culture and traditions
- Naming – Dee becoming Wangero – an acute criticism of the name changing practice very common among Cultural Nationalists who believed that giving up their names and taking up African ones make them reconnect their roots

Now coming to some of the major themes that the story puts across. Basically this story is Walker's response to cultural nationalism and Black Power movement of the 60s and 70s. Walker is quite critical of the irritation of limited history and ancestry of the blacks and embracing a more abstract concept of African heritage. She believes that talking about culture in a very shallow manner, the way Dee does in this story, does not really help much in understanding the immediate history.

Because yes it is true that they have a history of slavery but you cannot simply reject it. There is a kind of livelihood that these black women live. And she is kind to give voice to that life, that kind of a lifestyle which is you know that Mamma and Maggie is living as opposed to the kind of various abstract concept of heritage and culture and cultural values that Dee is trying to embrace. Which does not have any kind of rootedness at all, it is more abstract. And in order to bring this idea home closer, she uses the metaphor of quilt, which is a common metaphor that you find across all the stories or novels that Walker has written.

Because usually she alludes this process of quilting as the basis of high art and also is a representation of female bonding because, this act of quilting was very commonly practised by black women and there is a sense of bonding that has formed, just like the warp and weft of the quilts between these women. So, it is a, it is a representation of the sorority among the women of colour. And it represents much more than just a piece of cultural artefact. So that idea is brought across in the story with this session of the quilts, who should be the right owner of the quilt and Mamma feels that should be baggy because she is the one who will put into everyday use because that is what exactly this quilt is made for.

It is not just a cultural artefact, it also represents the kind of bonding and it runs, the kind of memory that runs through one's family, the quilt in this story as you read it you will understand, as you read it you will know, you will find that the quilt is made from these of clothes that their grandmother actually wore. It also has pieces of their grandfather's shirts and a small piece from the uniform that he wore in the Civil War. Maggie is the one who is all these things, Dee is absolutely ignorant of all these details, she just knows that this is something that her grandmother has made of her own hands.

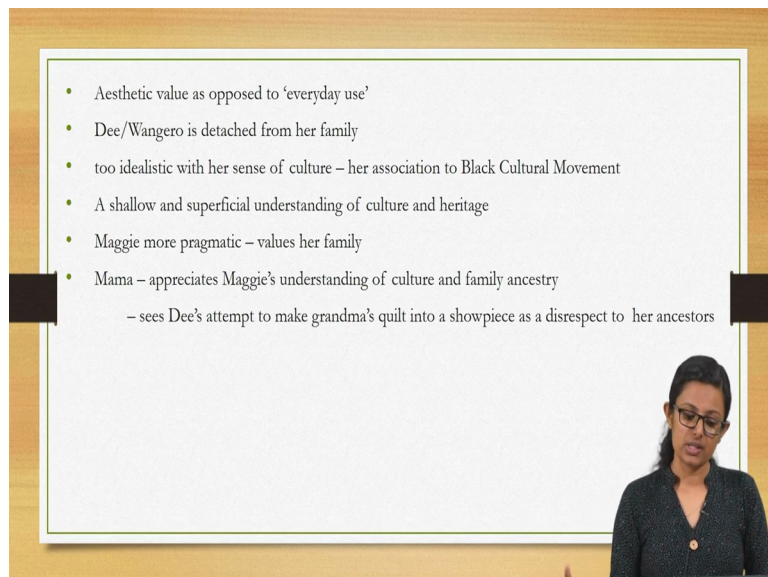
That is just that handcrafted value that she attributes to it, whereas Maggie is the one who is actually learned the art of quilting. So, Mamma believes that she is the rightful owner and that is made not to be displayed as a cultural artefact to be actually put to everyday use. Now, when Mamma is made as the narrator, Walker actually plays the stereotypes about the

uneducated black woman and give them a voice. And in, if we extend this argument further, it can also be considered as giving the black women and their oral tradition a literary continuity.

It is also important to remember that this story is dedicated to your grandmama that is how she dedicates the story. And this also indicates perhaps that she is dedicating this story to those black women who may not be politically conscious or would not understand the higher ideals attached to the black movements but are the true keepers of their culture and heritage. Now, in this critical response to the fashion that was at its peak during the early 70s of you know following African Styling in their dress as well as in Hairstyle.

There was also this pattern or a fashion of rejecting your what seem to be your slave names and adopting African names. And that particular fashion is also critiqued when she gives Dee the name Wangero Leewanika and she makes it criticism of this particular practice that is common among cultural nationalists who believed that giving up their names and taking up African ones will make them closer to their roots.

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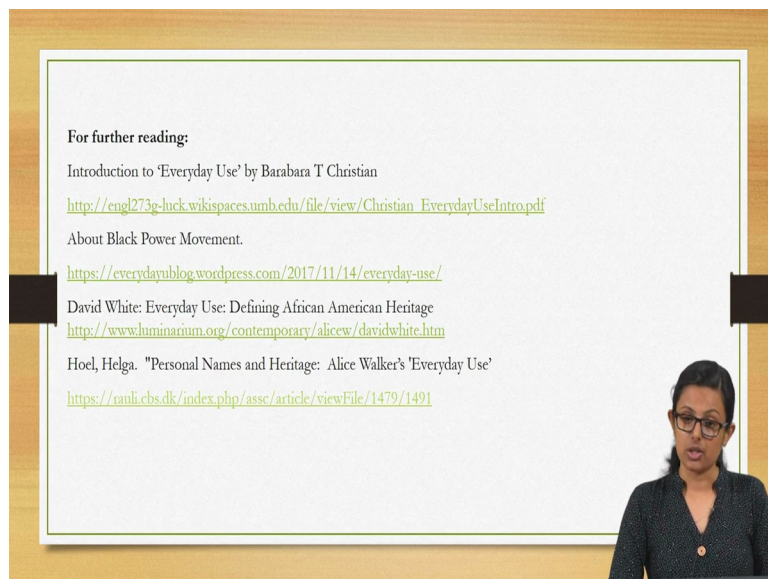
- Aesthetic value as opposed to 'everyday use'
- Dee/Wangero is detached from her family
- too idealistic with her sense of culture – her association to Black Cultural Movement
- A shallow and superficial understanding of culture and heritage
- Maggie more pragmatic – values her family
- Mama – appreciates Maggie's understanding of culture and family ancestry
 - sees Dee's attempt to make grandma's quilt into a showpiece as a disrespect to her ancestors

So, here through this particular story we see how there is juxtaposition in of aesthetic value and everyday use that she makes. And to represent these 2, you have the 2 characters Dee on one side and Maggie on the other. Dee is someone who is completely detached from her family, there is no personal relationship or personal attachment that she has to her family, familial and its history or heritage as us. But she is very idealistic venture talks about culture because, probably because of her these cultural nationalist movements.

And what we get to know from her behaviour in this story or the way she perceives things in the story is that her understanding of culture and heritage is quite shallow and superficial. On the other hand there is Maggie who is more pragmatic, who really values her family and her family members. So, this realisation comes to Mamma towards the end. So, at the beginning of the story you see, she perceives that, you know Dee is a more spirited, the strong, educated girl and she always had an upper hand in the family.

Whereas Maggie was the mute, the silenced girl in the home, whom you hardly see anywhere, she never even speaks. So, this perception kind of changes towards the end of the story when Mamma is able to appreciate Maggie's understanding of culture and family ancestry and she for the 1st time realises that perhaps Maggie is the more matured and understanding girl rather than Dee, whose attempt to make grandma's quilt in a showpiece becomes, is perceived as a disrespect to her ancestors.

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For further reading:

Introduction to 'Everyday Use' by Barbara T Christian
http://engl273g-luck.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Christian_EverydayUseIntro.pdf

About Black Power Movement.
<https://everydayublog.wordpress.com/2017/11/14/everyday-use/>

David White: Everyday Use: Defining African American Heritage
<http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/davidwhite.htm>

Hoel, Helga. "Personal Names and Heritage: Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'" <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/assc/article/viewFile/1479/1491>

So for further reading of this particular story, I have provided you with certain texts. Barbara Christian's introduction to Everyday Use and David Bites reading of Everyday Use, where there is a more elaborate discussion of how this criticism of the shallow understanding of African-American heritage is discussed further. And the use of personal names and heritage in Alice Walker's Everyday Use is also an interesting read. For further interesting insights, into this particular short story and I was given a link to know more about the black power movement. So, thank you.