

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

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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" (356). The text underscores such a reading by stating that immediately after the incident Maggie sits with her "mouth open" (58).

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" (50). 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" (51).

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, *snatches* the 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" (59).

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" (58). 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" (59).

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" (48). 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" (88)—the white-male-dominated system portrayed in 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" (49).

Marianne Hirsch paraphrases Valerie Smith's suggestion that "the mother sees in Maggie's angerless fear an image of her own passive acceptance of Dee's aggression, her own suppressed anger" (205). If, prior to her awakening, Mama is projecting her own anger and frustration onto her younger daughter,

then her descriptions and expectations of Maggie are unreliable. Particularly revealing is the second paragraph of the story, in which Mama pictures to herself how Maggie will act when Dee arrives. She believes that "Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe" (47). Most critics adopt Mama's view of Maggie, assuming her assessment to be accurate. Hirsch, for example, refers to Maggie's "resigned acquiescence" and "angerless fear" and describes her as "powerless" and "pathetic" (205).

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 her vow never to bring any friends home with her lest she be embarrassed, Maggie questions, "Mama, when did Dee ever *have* any friends?" (51). 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" (53), 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" (55) 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 (204), 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" (47). Indeed, in the end, Dee's oppressive voice is mute, for Mama has narrated her out of the story altogether.

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