

"Everyday Use" Handout

Activity One: Answer the following questions as a way of summarizing the text after your first read of the short story.

Guiding Questions	Response
1) Who is the narrator? What words does the author use to describe the narrator?	<i>The narrator is Mama. A woman described as a "large, big-boned woman", who works hard with "rough man-working hands".</i>
2) Compare and contrast the way the narrator dreams of being to the way she is in real life? What words/phrases describe her in the dream? What words or phrases describe her in real life? What does this daydream tell us about how Mama perceives her relationship with Dee?	<i>Mama dreams that she will be light-skinned and styled with hair that "glistens" in the light of the stage. She would be the kind of mother her daughter could be proud to show off on television. In contrast, she is described as overweight and slow-witted, the kind of woman who could not "look a white man in the eye."</i> <i>Mama wishes that Dee would be proud of her, but knows the reality is that she is ashamed of her family. Although Mama admires her daughter, she is uncertain how to relate to her.</i>
3) Reread the following quotation from the text: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" [Dee] said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use." What value does each character place on things for "everyday use," like the quilts or the churn?	<i>Mama sees the churn and quilts as part of their lives, made by her mother and father to be useful. They represent the way they survived. To Maggie the items represent her memories of spending time with these people. She wants to use them because it reminds her of the connection she had with her relatives. On the other hand, Dee sees these items as proof that she came from people who rose from slavery. The items represent her past, not her connection to her family.</i>
4) Reread the following quotation, "Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle, I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed." Interpret the meaning of these sentences. How does the end of the story contrast the beginning of the story?	<i>These sentences show that Maggie is no longer afraid of Dee. It is a complete turnaround from how Mama predicted she would be when Dee left.</i>

What caused this change?

Determining a theme:

Look at the theme subjects below. Circle the word that most accurately relate to the story.

Coming of Age	Romantic Love	Beauty of Nature	Wealth	Legacy	Patriotism
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Activity Two: While answering these questions, consider your answers to the first part of the questions and the overall theme of the story.

Second Read Guiding Questions	Response
1) How would the story be different if it were told from Dee's point of view?	<i>If the story were told from Dee's point of view, the reader would be able to sympathize with her position that African Americans have to restore their heritage after hundreds of years of slavery.</i>
Why did the author choose to have Mama narrate the story?	<i>The author wanted to show the reader that family legacy cannot be forgotten. Through the story, Walker shows her displeasure at the idea that history can just be written, as Dee has done with her name.</i>
How do the choice of narrator and her point of view contribute to the development of a theme in the text?	<i>By choosing Mama to narrate the story, Walker is able to present the voice of the people who lived through the aftermath of slavery.</i>
2) How does the description of this daydream create suspense for the reader? Why would the author tell about this daydream before Dee arrives?	<i>The daydream gives us a glimpse into Mama's wishes for her visit from Dee. The reader is left wondering if Mama will be accepted for who she is. The author chooses to describe this daydream to give the reader a glimpse into the family's relationship to one another before we get to the action of the story.</i>
What does this daydream and the background of the Dee's history reveal about the theme of the text?	<i>The author describes how Dee "will be" after Maggie's visit. Then she describes how Maggie has changed, describing her as "almost a woman" now. Mama also thinks about how Dee reacted to their home burning. "Why don't you dance around the ashes?"</i>
3) Reread the following quotation from the text: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" [Dee] said. "She'd probably be	<i>The daydream shows that the tension surrounding Dee has been present for some time. Always Dee has disapproved of her family and their belongings, she has never had a connection with them.</i>

<p>backward enough to put them to everyday use.”</p> <p>How do Mama and Maggie’s reactions reveal what they think about Dee’s complaint?</p> <p>What is the significance of this quotation given the title of the story?</p> <p>4) Reread the following quotation, “Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle, I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.”</p> <p>Explain how this paragraph develops a theme of the text.</p>	<p><i>Mama’s reaction reveals that she has had enough of Dee’s disapproval. At first Maggie wants to relinquish the quilts, giving in to Dee as she always does, but then she feels the warmth of her mother’s approval when Mama snatches the quilts from Dee’s hands.</i></p> <p><i>The quotation echoes of the symbolism of the title. Maggie’s desire to use the quilts every day show how she wants to be reminded, each day, of her connection to her family. Dee, instead, wants to keep the objects and her family at a distance, displaying them to show off, but not having any real every day connections with them.</i></p> <p><i>Mama has come to peace with her decision to side with Maggie. Dee didn’t really appreciate her family’s legacy; she wanted to display the family’s objects in the house, but she didn’t really want to be a part of her family.</i></p>
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Determining a theme: *Alice Walker reveals how legacy is a connection with people and family.*

In the short story, “Everyday Use” Alice Walker illustrates the idea that legacy is a connection with family, their struggles and their stories.