

Name:

Class:

Before Reading

Write a brief short story using all of the following words. You have five minutes.

family college	fire cows	gold style	heritage name
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PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

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Name:

Class:

“Everyday Use” By Alice Walker
Vocabulary

mercilessly	adv	
sidle	verb	
earnest	adj	
deliberately	adv	
pasture	noun	
furtive	adj	
cower	verb	
oppress	verb	
doctrines	noun	
clabber	noun	
rifling	verb	

Name:

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"Everyday Use" By Alice Walker
Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Who is the narrator of this story?

2. Why is Maggie nervous?

3. How does the narrator describe herself?

4. How does the narrator describe Maggie? What else can you infer about Maggie?

5. How does the narrator describe Dee? What else can you infer about Dee?

6. Why did Jimmy T. marry someone else despite his relationship with Dee?

7. What is the living situation like for Mama and Maggie?

8. How is Dee dressed when she arrives at her mother's house?

9. What is Dee's new name? Why does she change it?

10. What items does Dee find in Mama's bedroom that she wants to take with her?

11. Why does Mama refuse to give Dee what she wants?

12. How does the story end?

Name:

Class:

“Everyday Use” By Alice Walker
Literary Analysis Questions

1. What is the main conflict in this story?

PREVIEW

2. What evidence is there that Dee looks down on her sister and mother?

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3. What is the significance of the family's house burning down? Who has it impacted the most?

PREVIEW

4. What is the significance of Mama dreaming about being on Johnny Carson's show?

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5. What does the incident with the butter churn say about Dee?

PREVIEW

6. How does Maggie demonstrate her knowledge of her heritage?

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7. What is Dee implying when she says to Maggie “you ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for *us*. But from the way you and Mama still live, you'd never know it.”

PREVIEW

8. How has Mama's life experiences differed from Dee's?

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9. What does the word choice in the following statement imply? “She [Dee] wrote me once that no matter where we ‘**choose**’ to live, she will manage to come see us.”

PREVIEW

10. How and why has Dee changed her perspective on Mama’s old belongings?

11. How does Mama feel about her daughter Dee’s new name? Why is it significant?

PREVIEW

12. Why doesn't Dee want Maggie to have the quilts? Why is it ironic?

PREVIEW

13. Why do you think Maggie smiles as Dee says her goodbyes?

14. What purpose do you think Hakim-a-barber’s character serves in the story?

PREVIEW

15. What is one major theme from the story?

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Class:

“Everyday Use” By Alice Walker
Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Mama is a good mother to both daughters in the story? Why or why not?

PREVIEW

2. Who do you sympathize with the most in this story? Why?

3. What pieces of information are missing from this story? Explain.

PREVIEW

4. Do you view Dee as a totally unlikable character? Why or why not?

5. Is Mama proud of Dee? How do you know?

PREVIEW

6. Would you call the relationship between Dee and Maggie a rivalry? Why or why not?

7. What family conflicts have you experienced before? Have you ever been embarrassed by your parent(s)? Explain.

PREVIEW

8. How does “setting” affect the plot in this story? Could a story like this happen today? Explain.

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After Reading Writing Options

- A. Write a letter to Dee from Maggie that explains what heritage truly means. Include how Maggie feels about their family’s relationship and address Dee’s final words that Maggie should “make something of herself.”
- B. Write a letter to Mama from Dee that defends the behavior of her visit. Dee should provide explanation and perspective on why and how she has chosen a different path than her mother and sister.
- C. Write about a family heirloom that is priceless to you. What is the significance and history? How does it connect to your family’s culture? How do you plan to use the heirloom in your future?

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**“Everyday Use” By Alice Walker
Vocabulary**

mercilessly	adv	in a way that shows no pity
sidle	verb	to move in a shy, timid way
earnest	adj	describes sincere, intense and serious
deliberately	adv	doing something in a very intentional way
pasture	noun	land covered with grass and other low plants suitable for grazing animals
furtive	adj	describes someone attempting to avoid attention; to do something secretly
cower	verb	to crouch in fear
oppress	verb	to keep someone in subservience unjustly
doctrines	noun	principles or set of beliefs
clabber	noun	milk that has curdled or soured
rifling	verb	to search in a rough or speedy manner

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“Everyday Use” By Alice Walker
Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Who is the narrator of this story?

Mama is the narrator. She is the mother of two daughters, Dee and Maggie.

2. Why is Maggie nervous?

Maggie's sister is coming to visit; Maggie envies her and is in awe of her.

3. How does the narrator describe herself?

Mama describes herself as a big woman with rough hands. She is hard-working, uneducated, and practical.

4. How does the narrator describe Maggie? What else can you infer about Maggie?

Maggie is like a “lame animal” that has been run over by a car, but is still kind. She's homely, shy, non-confrontational, and insecure. She is embarrassed by the burn marks on her skin which came from a house-fire. She is knowledgeable about many things, but unsure of herself.

5. How does the narrator describe Dee? What else can you infer about Dee?

Dee is determined, ambitious, and beautiful. Mama thinks that Dee considers the family dumb and embarrassing. Dee wants nice things and she is materialistic. Dee sees her family as beneath her.

6. Why did Jimmy T. marry someone else despite his relationship with Dee?

Dee criticized him too much.

7. What is the living situation like for Mama and Maggie?

They live in a rural area. They are poor. They are content with how and where they live.

8. How is Dee dressed when she arrives at her mother's house?

Dee is wearing a long, yellow dress, gold earrings, and numerous bracelets. She looks very put together and is wearing clothes traditional of African culture.

9. What is Dee's new name? Why does she change it?

Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo—Dee changes her name because she does not want to be associated with the people who oppressed her and her ancestors.

10. What items does Dee find in Mama's bedroom that she wants to take with her?

Dee finds two quilts that have been pieced together with family heirlooms.

11. Why does Mama refuse to give Dee what she wants?

Mama already promised the quilts to her daughter Maggie.

12. How does the story end?

Dee leaves angry and annoyed with her mother. Dee tells Maggie that she should “make something of herself.” Maggie smiles and her and Mama relax.

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"Everyday Use" By Alice Walker
Literary Analysis Questions

1. What is the main conflict in this story?

The conflict is Dee vs. Mama and Maggie. They don't see eye-to-eye as far as what constitutes heritage. Dee wants a family quilt to show off her African heritage to her friends. Dee accuses Maggie of not being worthy of the quilts since she will probably just use it everyday in its most practical sense. The family heirlooms are tokens of Dee's identity and origins, but she actually knows little about the past. Dee just wants something to "show" whereas Maggie actually has learned the skill of quilting (in addition to her knowledge) which could be considered even more representative of their heritage.

2. What evidence is there that Dee looks down on her sister and mother?

One example is when Dee used to read to her Mother who is illiterate. Dee would do this just to show how much smarter she was compared to her mother and sister. "She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice."

3. What is the significance of the family's house burning down? Who has it impacted the most?

The fire impacted Maggie the most as she was severely burned in the fire. It's significant because it drove the sisters farther apart. Maggie is not as beautiful or as smart as Dee, and now Maggie has scars all over her body. These physical details allow Dee to brush off Maggie as unworthy. Additionally, some of Maggie's personality traits can be attributed to the fire: to include her insecurities, her timidity, and her lack of confidence. For Dee, the house was a symbol of poverty, so she did not care when it burned to the ground.

4. What is the significance of Mama dreaming about being on Johnny Carson's show?

Mama dreams about the person her daughter wishes she would be: her daughter Dee would prefer her to be attractive, skinnier, and witty.

5. What does the incident with the butter churn say about Dee?

Dee selfishly claims the dasher from the butter churn, as if she was entitled to it. She feels that whatever she wants, she gets. Dee completely disregards the reality that Mama and Maggie actually use the churn, which is still full of milk. She is taking something they use to feed themselves and turning it into a type of art, not really knowing what she wants to do with the items.

6. How does Maggie demonstrate her knowledge of her heritage?

Maggie immediately knows where the dasher is from, reciting that Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash.

7. What is Dee implying when she says to Maggie "you ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still love, you'd never know it.

Dee is implying that she is better than her sister Maggie because she left their home of poverty and is now educated. Mama and Maggie are content with their lifestyle but Dee thinks the way they live is shameful and too reminiscent of their past. Dee is speaking about African Americans when she says, "us." Dee is trying to enlighten Maggie that there are more opportunities for African Americans now and that Maggie should live more modernly.

8. How has Mama's life experiences differed from Dee's?

Mama is uneducated and has always lived in a rural area. She also grew up when Black Americans had fewer rights. The reason Mama can't read is because her school shut down when she was in second grade. Dee grew up with more opportunities for education. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Era was prevalent. Although racism was still prominent, more outspoken leaders were fighting against the laws that kept Black Americans oppressed.

9. What does the word choice in the following statement imply? “She [Dee] wrote me once that no matter where we **‘choose’** to live, she will manage to come see us.”

This line shows that Dee feels her mother and Maggie make a conscious decision to live in poverty. She believes that they could have a better life if they were more ambitious. She blames her mother and sister for their own circumstances.

10. How and why has Dee changed her perspective on Mama’s old belongings?

Dee used to be strongly ashamed of all Mama’s belongings. Dee now accepts the fact that she didn’t grow up rich. She takes a new interest in Mama’s old belongings because she wants to have these items on display to show off her heritage. She is proud that she has grown up to be sophisticated despite growing up with challenging circumstances. She wants to have these tokens to flaunt where she has come from.

11. How does Mama feel about her daughter Dee’s new name? Why is it significant?

Mama thinks Dee’s new name is ridiculous because Dee is named after family members, not her oppressors. This further shows the conflict between Dee and Mama and their mutual misunderstanding of one another. Mama thinks that her name Dee is part of her heritage. Mama thinks heritage is made up of family and traditions, but Dee thinks it’s more of something to display.

12. Why doesn’t Dee want Maggie to have the quilts? Why is it ironic?

Dee thinks that the quilts will be wasted on Maggie because she would put them to “everyday use” while Dee would display them and hang them up. It’s ironic that Dee would get mad at Maggie for using the quilt for “everyday use” because the quilt is literally made up of pieces from their family’s everyday use. For example, the quilt is made from pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear, and from their Grandfather’s paisley shirts, and even part came from their Great Grandfather’s civil war uniform.

13. Why do you think Maggie smiles as Dee says her goodbyes?

In the beginning of the story, Mama notes Maggie will be nervous until Dee comes and goes. Her sister is finally gone and the two women can enjoy the rest of their day with no judgement and no need to impress. Maggie probably is also smiling because for once in her life, someone said “no” to Dee. Maggie is happy that she gets to keep the quilts and that her Mama stuck up for her.

14. What purpose do you think Hakim-a-barber’s character serves in the story?

Like all of the other artistic objects Dee collects, Hakim-a-barber serves as another ornamentation of Dee’s. He is part of her façade of sophistication and commitment to her new found pride for African style. He represents her new religion, philosophy, and lifestyle.

15. What is one major theme from the story?

Answers will vary.

Heritage and culture are essential to an individual’s understanding of his or her life and identity.

You should appreciate where you come from, no matter how ugly or shameful you consider the past.

Real heritage is about legacy, connections, values, and history.

Authentic heritage is a part of everyday life, it is fluid and constantly being added to and changed.

Possessions are not what make up someone’s heritage or ancestral identity.

Only caring about what others think can cause you to lead a superficial life.

You can change your circumstances with hard work and determination, despite where you came from.

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Mama is a good mother to both daughters in the story? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Yes, because she pays for Dee to go to school. Yes, because she stands up for Maggie in the end. No, because she talks harshly about both daughters.

2. Who do you sympathize with the most in this story? Why?

Answers will vary.

3. What pieces of information are missing from this story? Explain.

Answers will vary.

4. Do you view Dee as a totally unlikable character? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

5. Is Mama proud of Dee? How do you know?

Answers will vary. Mama is proud of Dee's determination to "stare down disaster." Mama can't even bear to look a white man in the eyes (due to her traumatic past), but her daughter is fearless and will look anyone in the eyes without hesitation.

6. Would you call the relationship between Dee and Maggie a rivalry? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

7. What family conflicts have you experienced before? Have you ever been embarrassed by your parent(s) before? Explain.

Answers will vary.

8. How does "setting" affect the plot? Could a story like this happen today? Explain.

The setting is America in the South during the 1960s. Part of the reason Mama and Dee are so different is because of how they grew up. Because Mama grew up in a much harsher time for African Americans, Mama has lived a much rougher life and has learned to prevail on her own terms—sticking to what she is good at. Dee is growing up in a time of enlightenment and objections to the racism that has been prevalent in America. Mama still is suspicious of white men due to experience, but Dee is unafraid because she is ready to fight.

In the 1960s, Malcolm X was a popular Civil Rights Leader, African American nationalist, and religious leader. He urged his fellow Black Americans to protect themselves against white aggression "by any means necessary." Malcolm even changed his last name to "X" to represent his rejection of his "slave" name which may have influenced Dee's decision to change her name.

Something *similar* could occur today as many young adults struggle with identity and family issues (especially after leaving home for the first time and trying to navigate where one fits in).