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Identity: Roots vs Appearance

In the short story “Everyday Use,” written by Alice Walker in the 1960s, a family seeks to understand their identities and heritage through different methods including setting, which motivates them differently. Mama, the narrator, and Maggie, her daughter, live in a rural, poor Southern area. Dee, Maggie’s sister, visits her family after she left them to obtain an education in the city, where she has become more sophisticated. It becomes obvious the different impact the daughters upbringing left of them. In “Everyday Use,” Alice Walker develops and differentiates the characters, especially Dee, through the setting, and in doing so creates a central argument that place and family are more important to a person’s identity than appearance.

The author immediately opens the story with a description of the physical setting, illustrating its effects and possible limitations. Mama and her two daughters live in an a poverty stricken area, and their house has “no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside” (365). Having glass in windows doesn’t seem like a luxury to us, but in this instance, Walker uses the lack of real windows to emphasize the family’s poverty. Likewise, the yard is considered their “extended living room” (362). The author uses physical descriptions of the family’s living situation to display their economic status and the hardships associated with it. Dee “hated the house” (364) because she “wanted nice things” (364), rather than the bare

minimum. Unlike her mother and sister, Dee is not content with their current situation. This physical setting not only suggests poverty but also pride because of how well Mama and Maggie take care of what they have.

In contrast to Mama's pride in place, Dee is described as the exact opposite of her mother in ethics, style, and attitude. Dee is ashamed of her family's house and will "never bring her friends" (365) over. She changes her name from "Dee" to "Wangero Leewankia Kemanjo" because she felt that her old name, which was passed through the family, gave credit to their oppressors. Instead of embracing this name loaded with family history, she chooses another name which she feels showcases her African heritage better. Furthermore, Dee "never takes a [picture] without making sure the house is included" (366), seemingly because she needs proof of the poor residence she grew up in. Walker uses these details to illustrate that Dee is more concerned with her appearance and showing off where she came from than actually understanding her heritage. In contrast, Mama, "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man working hands" (363) is satisfied and proud of where she lives. Unlike Dee who sees significance in school education and social advancement, Mama views practical skills and knowledge as more important.

This story forces readers' attention on the difference in perspective; Maggie and Mama's love for place is obvious in their pride for their home. In contrast, Dee's focus on trends makes her seem less settled and very arrogant. Although some may argue Dee uses setting to motivate herself to work hard and into a higher socioeconomic class, her superior attitude drives us to side with Mama. Mama believes Dee "burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know" (364), forcing unwanted words and facts on them. It becomes obvious through Mama's commentary and tone that she is offended by Dee's attempt to share her knowledge. The

difference in their perspectives is seen as Dee wants to preserve the quilt by hanging it for display, whereas Mama and Maggie hold onto the practical use of the family's quilt. Mama and Maggie are practical, simplistic people who are content with their life. They see the importance of knowledge, such as knowing their family history rather than textbook history. However, Dee feels the only way to be successful and content is through a school education. She tells her sister "it's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it" (370). Dee urges Maggie to leave the comfortable setting of her poor Southern home in order to live a new, better life. Although Dee means well, she comes across as condescending and superior.

Clearly, Walker wants readers to sympathize with Mama's viewpoint. Maggie and Mama feel their heritage is honored through practical use of items, and they are satisfied with their life in a poor rural area. Even though Dee makes a good point that "it's a new day" (370) for African Americans at the time, and her family "choose" to live in poverty, she loses respect because she isn't sympathetic. Dee is so focused on her displaying her appearance as a proud African American woman who rose from nothing, that she fails to understand her actual close family heritage. Thus, Dee is disrespectful to her own family. Alice Walker uses the setting of "Everyday Use" to illustrate the differences in characters; more importantly, she proves a person's identity is more importantly connected to family and roots rather than appearance.