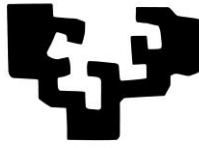


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**I Love You my Dear, but First Things
First: Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"
from *In Love and Trouble***

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Abstract

"Everyday Use" is a short story settled on the Sixties; an important decade which challenged the American social values. The short story was written by Alice Walker, a writer who belongs to the reduced group of black women writers who managed to made their voice universal. The short story contains a rich thematic and a wide symbology concerning African-American heritage, family values and family relationships. Hence, this paper attempts to analyze the treatment of these subjects taking into account the importance of the period the story takes place, the perspectives offered by the different characters and the role of the narrator. In order to do so, I will begin by revising the context of the short story so as to demonstrate the repercussion the decade of the 1960s had on the values addressed in the short story. In like manner, in an attempt to clarify the antecedents of the subjects discussed in "Everyday Use," I will examine the life and influences of Alice Walker, especially focusing on Zora Neale Hurston, the precursor of the contemporary group of female African-American writers, who previously dealt with themes such as African-American heritage and folklore. Subsequently, I will discuss the importance and the function of the narrator since it turns out to be a crucial factor regarding the understanding and the interpretation of the story. As an essential part of the story which determines the fate of the events, and which consequently helps me constructing my interpretation, I analyze the role of the three women of the short story as heritage and folklore keepers both through the symbols appearing in the story and their opposite identities. I conclude the paper by stating that each character in the story appreciates her legacy and family values from different perspectives. However, being the mother the narrator and the guide of the story, she becomes also the judge, and hence, the figure who helps us reaching the significance of the story.

Keywords: short story; Alice Walker; African-American heritage; family relationships

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1. Introduction

The group of black women writers is a collective that nowadays enjoys great prestige, but which unfortunately has needed much time to emancipate and to gain reputation. On the one hand, because it initially addressed a reduced group of readers, and on the other hand, due to the themes this collective dealt with, mainly concerning their race and their female condition. The acclaimed Alice Walker belongs to this group of black women writers which managed to achieve the respect and the admiration today is able to enjoy. The short story "Everyday Use," written in 1973, was published along with other twelve short stories in a collection book called *In Love and Trouble*. This book is a collection of stories of black women, and it addresses exclusively subjects concerning the black community; especially women's.

The short story is set in the Southern United States of the Sixties; a decade which experienced new social changes, fruit of the clash between the established society and the disconformity of the masses. This decade, and especially the civil rights movement, inspired Alice Walker to depict a personal clash inside a family of three black women. Each member of the family values differently the heritage and the folklore received from prior generations. Mama is the protagonist, narrator and focalizer of the story, "a large, big-boned woman," who with Maggie, her timid and scarred daughter, waits for Dee, her oldest daughter. Dee has spent some years away from home and comes back with her companion Hakim-a-barber, a Black Muslim, to meet her family. Dee, or Wangero - the way she has decided to be called -, returns home with ideas typical of the period the story is set. Hence, she starts appropriating subjects like heritage, folklore and family values, which ironically, she had rejected before. All these factors cause a clash between Mama, Dee or Wangero and even Maggie. Alice Walker explores this clash and develops a story about the conflicted relationship between opposites. All this considered, it is my purpose in this paper to analyze the treatment of subjects like heritage, folklore and traditional values throughout the story and especially from the perspectives offered by the three protagonists.

In order to do so, I will examine the history and the context of the short story, taking a glance to the history of the United States and emphasizing on the Sixties. I will also talk about the author, Alice Walker, and the influences she got as a story teller.

Furthermore, I will deepen into Walker's most important influence when writing a short story which carries an enormous symbolic thematic concerning African-American heritage and folklore. Subsequently, I will discuss the importance of the narrator's leadership so that we get our meaning or our interpretation of the story. Finally, I will analyze the importance that subjects as African-American heritage and traditional values acquire in the short story both through symbols and through the principal characters.

2. History and context of "Everyday Use"

2. 1. Past and tradition before the Sixties

As Cleaver (qtd. in Roca 27) pointed out in 1968, in the United States of America everything has a private owner. In fact, until recently, even black people were property. After suffering centuries of slavery, a cruel Secession War (1861-1865) and a Reconstruction era (1865-1877), slavery was abolished. Yet, equality did not exist between blacks and whites. Besides, the Southern part of the United States, having belonged mainly to planters and slave owners, still remained more racist and segregationist than the rest of the States. This difference in ideology is still appreciable in the United States, since the South belongs almost entirely to the Republican Party.

The following years black communities had to face supremacist organizations such as the White League, the Redshirts and the Ku Klux Klan. However, the black population managed to keep fighting for their rights and the result of all these years of struggle is the creation of diverse groups, associations and movements that publicly and internationally flourished in the Sixties (Roca 46-47).

The Sixties was the most important decade in the history of the US in the twentieth century; it was a disturbing decade where American values were threatened. The civil rights movement would be the first movement that flourished in an era that challenged the imposed postwar social order. American society was entirely shaken by different newborn groups and trends which fought against "the establishment" and the Vietnam War, as well as in favor of civil rights and individual freedom (Roca 59-60). In this period, some trends defend the savage individualism whereas others try to found

communities; some of them fight for the social integration but others reaffirm the native or/and the black culture. Furthermore, some trends expect to transform the society while others just intend to escape from it taking drugs and adopting alternative ways of lives (Roca 65). Certainly, we are talking about groups and trends such as the students movement, the counterculture movement, the women's liberation movement, the civil rights movement and many intellectual figures who from fields like literature, journalism, theatre, philosophy, politics and even religion showed their personal disconformities, criticized the system, denounced its lacks and proposed reforms and alternatives (Roca 66).

Taking into consideration the context of this essay, the civil rights movement was one of the most important movements. Back in the beginnings of the 20th century, some sensitivity currents started. Such is the case of the pan-Africanism, an intellectual movement which broadened the idea of going back to Africa, promulgated by Marcus Garvey (Roca 34). The civil rights movement started to take form in the 1950s with the *Brown v. Board of Education* - a Supreme court in which African American minors' assistance had been denied in public schools due to race segregation (oyez.org) - and Rosa Park's arrest for refusing to sit at the back of the bus as ordered by the law in the United States

Two important representatives stood out in this movement that later on flourished: on the one hand, there was Martin Luther King Jr., a black pastor from Atlanta. Luther King Jr. reunited thousands of Americans for the civil rights and against segregation with a rhetoric which combined Mahatma Gandhi's precepts of nonviolence and Christian gospel theories (kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu). On the other hand, we have Malcolm X, the personality who challenged the multiracial and nonviolent approach of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Sixties. According to Roca (117), Malcolm X joined the Nation of Islam (NOI) and adopted a nationalist and a suspicious point of view towards the whites at the beginning of his career - he asserted that black people should organize separately from whites and that an independent black state should be formed -. However, while his career was growing, Malcolm X moderated this ideology. In Abu Jamal's words (qtd. in Roca 118), Malcolm X represented the power to grow, develop and transform personally.

Movements and ideas of the Sixties derived in more and stronger movements. For instance, inspired by the civil rights movement's most radical wing and anti-capitalist politics (Roca 106), the Black Panthers encouraged millions of people - where more than the half of them were women - to start a revolution, to believe in black power and to fight against the system. Some distinguished members of the party who made history are Huey Newton, Bobby Seale - the founders -, Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Tina Harris, among others (Roca 110-111).

The history of women changed drastically in this decade. Although we discover the outsets of the women's movement back in the 19th and the beginnings of the 20th century, when women got the vote, it was in the Sixties that contemporary women's movement flourished (J. J. Farrell 234). Women participating in various movements such as the civil rights, the students' protests and antiwar groups began meeting as women (Zinn 511) and they brought their fight into the politics. As Zinn claims (501), the most profound effect of women's movement of the Sixties - beyond the actual victories of abortion, the approval of the birth control pill and the job equality - was the so-called "consciousness raising", or in other words, the rethinking of roles, the rejection of inferiority, the confidence in self and the bond of sisterhood.

However, black women took some time more to emancipate. As Smith (xi) points out, "a black woman in turn-of-the-century America [...] had approximately the same civil liberties as a farm animal." Again, during the 1960s, many black women did as their white female peers did: they started organizing in little communities (Zinn 498) and little by little, as civil rights movement and women's liberation movement took form, black women started gaining voice.

2. 2. Literature from the past and the present

Concerning literature and its writers, the most emblematic movement in African-American history before 1960 is the Harlem Renaissance: a cultural phenomenon taking place in Harlem, New York, from 1919 to 1929. Before the "negro resurgence," to be a black writer in United States was a lonely avocation. Indeed, for an African-American writer prior to the 1920s, the act of writing was more important than the

written work. Yet, there were many writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké or George Moses Horton who wrote about themes such as breaking bonds with slavery, freedom and the research of a voice, among others (Harris xi-xii).

During World War I (1914-1918) the settlement from New York filled up by black people coming from mainly the South: it was the time of the Great Migration. In this exodus, African-Americans migrated from the South to cities in the North looking for better jobs. In Lathbury's (41) words, "in the sudden influx of blacks, the energy derived from a change of scenery, and the celebratory mood of the country ignited a burst of creativity". This is the so-called Harlem Renaissance, which not only was a literary phenomenon, but also musical, cinematographic and ideological (Lathbury 41). Some remarkable artists are Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois and especially, Zora Neale Hurston.

Regarding black women writers, it could be said that they have had to face more difficulties than any literary group. In fact, black women writers are the minority of a minority. As Evans (xvii) asserts, "very little serious critical attention has been directed toward the creative energy and expertise of that large body of Black women who have provided the matrix for much of what is classic, what is significant, what is nurturing in the field of African-American letters." Evans maintains (xvii) that even in 1979 there was no research volume that criticized and analyzed the works of just some representatives of black women writers. They also have had to confront numerous prejudices which damaged their literary skills. Such is the case of those who claimed that "Black women writers have usually refused to dispense with whatever was clearly black and/or female in their sensibilities in an effort to achieve the mythical 'neutral' voice of universal art" (Smith xvi). We may see, though, that this is not the case, as black female protagonists of black female writers like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison reject the "neutral" universal voice; instead, they adopt a "black-infected dialect" (Smith xvii) and they are sexually voracious and unafraid (Smith xvi). What in the past was a reduced group which struggled against malicious criticisms, has already largely grown and specialized. Hopefully, nowadays there is a large amount of study devoted to these writers and their works.

3. Alice Walker

3. 1. Life and works

Alice Walker is an African-American woman writer from the South of the United States. Blinded in one eye at age eight by a careless shot from a brother's BB gun, Alice Walker spent her childhood feeling an outcast and ugly. It was in this period when she began really "to see people and things." In an attempt to come out of her solitary position, Walker started to immerse in a world of words (Walker, *In Search* 244).

Alice Walker counts on a large list of influences: from Russian literature - especially Tolstoy's short stories - to Southern white writers. White women writers such as Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf have also had an impact on Walker's writing due to the fact that they all are oppressed by their woman condition and they write from the perspective of women (Walker, *In Search* 251). Nevertheless, the group which Walker is most influenced by are black women writers; a group, in Walker's words, which has not ever been taken as seriously as black male writers. Firstly, because they are women; and secondly, because critics seem unusually "ill-equipped to discuss and analyze the works of black women intelligently." As Walker highlights, critics prefer to talk about black women lives rather than their writings (Walker, *In Seach* 260).

Furthermore, Walker has been profoundly immersed in civil rights and women's rights movements. She herself experienced the civil rights revolution in the South and has written several essays discussing the issue. One of them is the acclaimed essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" in which she claimed that "because we live, it [the civil rights movement] can never die." The book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* gathers some of her essays which examine from close-up the civil rights movement, the feminist struggles, and the reality of being a black woman writer.

Regarding the influences of Walker, and in a more general context, of the African-American women writers of her decade, Zora Neale Hurston must be signaled as the most representative landmark. Alice Walker discovered Hurston in 1970 when she was collecting material on voodoo practices among Southern blacks of the thirties. In her writings, Hurston embraced her people and her culture and brought back all the

stories that laid forgotten (Walker, *In Search* 85). She also captured better than anybody the beauty of rural black expression. Therefore, Walker received from Hurston a critical link for the rediscovery of her literary past, and in a way, Walker felt obliged to do the same with Hurston, since, as she explains (*In Search* 92), "it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children." Walker republished many of Zora Neale Hurston's works and gave her a notable reputation and an international recognition.

3. 2. Alice Walker: short story writer

Alice Walker, just through the title of one of her essays - "A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children" - determines the reason why she writes. Certainly, she writes for the future (*In Search* 249), if and when the work that has been created before her is preserved (*In Search* 135). As she asserts (*In Search* 138), Walker writes about what is real, since "what is real is what did happen". She goes on by saying that "what happened to me and happens to me is most real of all." Hence, she writes about people from out there, in the strangest way that it seems that she does not write about the people, but about herself: "the artist then is the voice of the people, but she is also the people."

Walker is a versatile writer: she has written poems, novels, essays and mainly, short stories. As she points out (*In Search* 240), many of the stories that she has written, or writes, are her mother's stories. Walker maintains that through years of listening to her mother's stories, she has absorbed not only the stories themselves, but also the manner in which her mother spoke and that necessity of recording the knowledge of her stories and her life.

Walter Benjamin claimed in his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" that storytelling is the ability to exchange experiences that goes from mouth to mouth (362). And this is in a great extent what Alice Walker does with her short stories, since her short stories are not but the stories that she listened and learnt from her mother. When Benjamin affirms that the listener's relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his/her interest in retaining what he/she is told (370), it should be said that Walker is not far from doing so, since when she listened to her

mother's stories she felt "the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded" (Walker, *In Search* 240). Benjamin makes a difference between the novel and the story writing. In his words, "the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual" (364), whereas that of the story is experience - "his own or that reported by others"-; in other words, a collective; a plurality. Here again, it is exactly what Walker does when she creates a short story. She is being transmitted a story which comes from a collective -from many generations and many people -, and she in turn transmits it.

Alice Walker uses the tradition of stories to write short stories; a difference to be taken into account, since a story and a short story do not necessarily mean the same. As Charters (3) explains,

The word story itself has two meanings. It can refer to a literary text or it can refer to the events themselves that are represented in the text. In contrast, the term short story always means the name of a particular literary genre. It refers to a short fictional prose narrative, usually involving one unified episode, and it is often applied to any work of narrative prose fiction shorter than a novel.

Additionally, another clarifying characteristic of short stories would be that they must abstain from the comprehensiveness of the novel, but in turn, they gain compression using "language with the force of poetry" (Charters 6). Indeed, the short story that I am going to analyze in this paper, Walker's "Everyday Use", contains a very strong thematic and poetic language.

4. African-American tradition and folklore: Zora Neale Hurston's influence

In order to understand Walker's works, first we have to understand the works and writers that have influenced her. As Harris suggests (qtd. in Frías 15), having been Zora Neale Hurston the most prolific African-American woman writer before 1970, she served as a literary model to writers like Walker and others in the period after 1970. In fact, it could be said that it was this group of contemporary black women writers who discovered Hurston. As Walker has claimed several times, Hurston is the author who has influenced her the most. Certainly, we find many characteristics in Walker's work

which are clearly inspired by Hurston thematic and language. As Howard claims (11), Walker responds to "Zora's call" deepening the themes Hurston developed and giving them a stronger voice. The short story "Everyday Use" is just another example, and that is why I am going to analyze the aspects in Walker's work which are undoubtedly inspired by the thematic frame previously developed by Hurston.

Walker argued that for her "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world" (*In Search* 251) and their lives a source of inspiration. Examining her fiction, it is needless to say that black women are also the protagonists of nearly all her works. In "Everyday Use", for instance, the protagonists are three African-American relatives. Likewise, Zora Neale Hurston was a pioneer back in the outskirts of the 20th century employing black female protagonists. Hurston was raised in an all-black town, unaware of being a minority. This experience made Hurston in a great extent the writer she was: a writer who made realistic representations of black women in African-American literature through her portrayal of black female characters (Frías 15). She wrote about African-American lives and customs - let's say about the "blackness" in a natural, inevitable and complete way (Smith xx) - . Taking the short story as a starting point, Walker develops the "blackness" aspect through different viewpoints: on one side we have Mama and Maggie; and on the other side there is Dee, who disagrees completely on the ideas sustained by Mama and Maggie. According to Susan Farrell (1), Maggie and Mama show an "allegiance to their specific family identity and folk heritage as well as their refusal to change at the whim of an outside world that doesn't really have much to do with them." By contrast, Dee proposes a view of heritage and a strategy for contemporary African-Americans to overcome an oppressive society.

Furthermore, both authors develop the so-called theme of "racial health," or what in Walker's words is "a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." In other words, a sentiment of pride in black people (Howard 85). According to Howard (8), Hurston presents black people who are self-sufficient, isolated from the realities of the world around them, not conscious of the racism, prejudices and segregation affecting them. Walker, meanwhile, deepens inside that insulated world to explore how the people, especially women, are affected by those around them, but particularly by other family members. In addition, Walker goes beyond by encouraging African-American people first to know their past and second, to

take it back, take control of it and right it if needed (Howard 8). In the case of "Everyday Use," here again we have two fronts. The first one incarnated by Maggie and Mama: they live happily in their black community, they have no contact with the outside/the white world - except the television and Johnny Carson's show, about which we will talk about later on -, and they do not mind:

She [Dee] used to read us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know.

In Love and Trouble: "Everyday Use" (50)

On the other hand we have Dee, who is also complete, complex and undiminished in her incarnation of "blackness": she is also proud of belonging to the African-American community as it seems that she appreciates her heritage and her family's history: "[talking about the family's quilts] These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine!" ("Everyday Use" 57). However, Dee seems affected by her family members' vision of "racial health," inappropriate and old-fashioned in her opinion: "You ought to try to make something of yourself, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it" ("Everyday Use" 50). Lastly, Dee could serve as a spokesperson for Walker's concept of "racial health" so that African-American people take control of their past and rectify it: "I couldn't bear it [her name Dee] any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" ("Everyday Use" 53).

As Walker herself points out (*In Search* 89), Hurston's work "comes from the essence of black folk life." What Hurston did in her years of activity as a writer and as an anthropologist was to collect black folklore that African-American people had forgotten and brought it back to their legacy of knowledge. Walker, in turn, after discovering Hurston in the 1970s, recovered all the material that in like manner kept hidden with Hurston's work. Thus, as Harris indicates (qtd. in Howard 31), Walker's familiarity with the African-American folklore may be due to the fact that she has a "background comparable to Hurston's in touching the soil in which her people grew." Hence, at the same level, both authors are considered African-American folklore

collectors. Within this folklore-keeping, both authors developed in their writings the importance of family values, heritage and traditions. Such is the case of Hurston's *Mules and Men*, which deals with the oblivion African-Americans faced regarding their cultural inheritance when they moved into bigger towns (Walker, *In Search* 84). These are themes which count on a notable importance in Walker's short story. According to White (1), Mama is a practical woman who does not spend much time thinking about abstract concepts such as heritage. However, as White maintains, Mama's lack of education ("I never had an education myself" 50) and refinement "does not prevent her from having an inherent understanding of heritage based on her love and respect for those who came before her." We observe that Mama is connected to her past and her tradition through the practice of quilt-making; a practice which in White's words (1) serves to symbolize "a bond between women": "These old things was just done by me and Big Dee from some tops your grandma pieced before she died" (57). Dee or Wangero, according to White (2), has a much more superficial idea of heritage, even though she appreciates her heritage, as illustrated below:

"Oh, Mama!" she cried. Then turned to Hakim-a-barber. "I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump prints," she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish.

"Everyday Use" 55

However, in Cowart's words (175), "Walker exposes Wangero's preservationism as hopelessly selfish and misguided." Winchell argues (81) that because heritage is a fashionable display, Dee decides to be proud of it. In few words, Dee's interest on folklore and heritage may be real, although this interest may lay just in frivolous aspects like fashion. Thirdly, we have Maggie, the scarred and shy daughter, whose eyes on ground and feet in shuttle demonstrate the typical African-American slaves' submissive character. Nonetheless, White highlights (3) that Maggie is very aware of her heritage, as she displays in the following passage:

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

"Everyday Use" 58

As Cowart claims (174), "Maggie represents the multitude of black women who must suffer while the occasional lucky 'sister' escapes the ghetto." Therefore, we have on Maggie the incarnation of the history's suffering black women, who undervalue themselves but who are really proud of their past and are able to maintain their people's folklore.

Hence, it ought to be said that Zora Neale Hurston's literary legacy, but especially, her folklore gathering defined very clearly the theoretical frame in which Walker's "Everyday Use" is based on. As Harris supports (in Howard 32), both Hurston and Walker have different conceptions of folk characters, and that is why both of them create memorable characters with different conceptualizations of the African-American folk spirit. A remarkable example of that is the diversity given among the three characters of "Everyday Use" by means of themes as heritage and folklore, blackness and "racial health."

5. Mrs. Johnson: a narrator and a guide throughout the story

The point of view from which the story is recounted has much to do with its understanding. In this case, the short story "Everyday Use" is entirely narrated by Mama. Thus, according to Susan Farrell (1367), all the actions and opinions are subjectively judged since we receive the perceptions after they have been filtered through Mama's mind. For instance, the opinion we construct about Maggie and Dee/Wangero depends completely on Mama's opinion, and actually, the perceptions we get about the two sisters may not be quite accurate. As Farrell claims (1368), Mama is "often wrong about her expectations of Dee/Wangero and her readings of Dee/Wangero's emotions." Such is the case of the house: Mama thinks Dee/Wangero used to hate the house and that she "will want to tear it down" (51). She even adopts a protective position towards the house when Dee/Wangero and her companion arrive: "I have deliberately turned my back on the house" (51). However, when Dee/Wangero arrives home, she brings a camera and she "never takes a shot without making sure the house is included" (53). The Johnny Carson television daydream would be another passage which helps us understanding the viewpoint Mama presents regarding Dee/Wangero. In Mama's fantasy mother and daughter are happily reunited, like in the

typical whites' television show. The passage lets us know the manipulative nature of Dee/Wangero and it helps us understand that their relation is far from being acceptable:

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

[...] 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.

"Everyday Use" 48

Nevertheless, this fantasy is only Mama's; as Susan Farrell suggests (1368), we do not know if Mama's vision of her perfect physical appearance is actually Dee's wish or only Mama's perception of "what she imagines Dee would like her to be." Hence, we only have Mama's voice and opinion, and this opinion could sometimes be exaggerated (1368). The same happens with Maggie, since Mama describes her as a passive, scary and insecure person ("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" 47), and she is not exactly as innocent and fearful as we thought she was. Susan Farrell persists in claiming that Mama "displaces what seem to be her own fears onto Maggie" (1367).

Yet, it cannot be denied that Mama is the most important character of the story, since we are able to understand the short story thanks to her. Indeed, Mama's voice is the guidance which allows us to construct our interpretation of the story.

Through Mama's first person narration, the story addresses the dilemma concerning the civil rights movement. In a period where minorities such as the African-Americans struggled to define their identity and fought to escape from prejudices, it was quite easy to reject the American heritage (White 1). Or, in other words, to succumb to a terrible deracination, or a "sundering from all that has sustained and defined them"

(Coward 171). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, deracination is the action of removing or separating "from a native environment or culture" or especially, removing "the racial or ethnic characteristics or influences." This act of giving up heritage is the dilemma Mama deals with in the short story and of which inevitably we become participants.

We infer certain criticism or at least skepticism with the apparition of Hakim-a-barber, Dee/Wangero's companion. Hakim-a-barber is a Black Muslim, or a black person who has embraced the Islam principles in his/her vision of rediscovering the roots. However, Hakim-a-barber is more interested in proclaiming his ideology than working to carry into practice Black Muslims' ideas (White 3), as depicted in the following passage:

"You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road," I said. They say "Asalamalakim" when they met you, too, but they didn't shake hands. Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt-lick shelters, throwing down hay. When the white folks poisoned some of the herd the men stayed up all night with rifles in their hands. I walked a mile and a half just to see the sight. Hakim-a-barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style."

"Everyday Use" 54

With this passage, which first has been filtered by Mama's mind, we can clearly perceive a suspicious opinion towards the trend that many African-Americans adopted in the Sixties and the Seventies. In fact, it was Alice Walker who claimed in her essay "From an Interview" that because she was curious about this conversion - for instance, about how this "new" religion affected the collective consciousness of the African-American converts - , she decided to deal with the issue showing her respect for the militancy but also displaying some skepticism (Walker, *In Search* 265).

Besides, Mama has also more aspects of the civil rights to be in disagreement about. As White asserts (1), an African-American is both African and American, and Mama feels that her older daughter seems to have forgotten it. On the one hand, getting rid of the name she has been given after the women who has preceded her, as visible below:

"You [Dee/Wangero] 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.

"Everyday Use" 53-54

On the other hand, wanting to hang the quilts only for exhibition, "as if that was the only thing you [Dee/Wangero] *could* do with quilts." Or in other words, just frivolously displaying - as the trend of the decade dictated - a symbolic device which allowed to the family to remain in touch "with a proximate history and a immediate cultural reality" (Coward 172). All things considered, even though Mama respects Dee/Wangero's ideological and cultural decisions - she does not hesitate to learn and use her daughter's new name (S. Farrell 1371) -, she does not agree with Dee/Wangero's definition of "heritage." Thus, Mama gives to Dee/Wangero the "no" Dee/Wangero needed and decides to entrust the quilts to Maggie, who has proved that she truly appreciates and admires her heritage.

Therefore, it is Mama the protagonist who gives shape and meaning to the short story, since thanks to her, we are able to judge and reach the moral of the story. Going further, we could state that Mama is Alice Walker's voice who serves to transmit a recognition message regarding African-American heritage and values.

6. Black women, bearers of heritage

6. 1. African-American women's heritage through symbols

The black woman is "the *mule* of the world." Walker (*In Search* 232) quotes Jean Toomer's words to signal black women as those who suffer, who are so "unconscious" of their value. However, this sentence could also be interpreted as the statement that values the importance of women as the ones who keep and transmit heritage and folklore.

The short story "Everyday Use" is to a great extent a homage which praises black women's ability to transfer values, heritage and folklore. Just the story is dedicated to our preceding generations: "for your grandmama." Throughout the story we find many symbols which allegorize women's capacity to join present ideas with past values and maintain alive stories and customs that would have remained forgotten. Such is the case of the yard. The yard in the story is an example of simplicity. Like the Japanese *hira-niwa* gardens, the yard where Mama and Maggie live inspires "emotional balm and spiritual serenity to those who tend or contemplate it" (Coward 176). Indeed, the yard evokes the minimalist but spiritually wealthy lives of poor people, as it is suggested below: ¹

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

"Everyday Use" 47

The conception of this yard could be linked with the gardens described by Walker in the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (*In Search* 241). As she narrates, her mother used to adorn the gardens "with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in." Walker goes on by stating that her mother's plants grew magically even in the worst grounds, and that they were so radiant, that people from outside came to see them: "whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden." Hence, Walker's mother manages to make her art - her precious garden -, her heritage; the traditions, values and folklore remain alive in a land that may have been useless.

Coward (174) paraphrases Freud's words to claim that houses are associated with women. Precisely, this story of three women is also the story of three houses. Coward goes on by asserting that in this story we have three houses: "one that burned, one that shelters two of the fire's survivors, and one, never directly described, that is to be the

¹ Statement by Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce Baker's "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use,' quoted in Coward 176.

repository of various articles of this family's past, its heritage." The first one would be the one which caused the scars on Maggie, the second is the house where Mama and Maggie live in the story and the third one would be associated to Dee or Wangero, since aware of the traditional value of the objects and products of her family's past, she wants to take them, bring them to her house and preserve them as decorative motifs. The house could not only serve to symbolize the protagonists' nature, but also to exemplify the chronology of the traditional values' fate: the house that burned could be an allegory to the past and especially to the traditional values that were forgotten; the house which shelters Mama and Maggie could symbolize the present time, or the time where some traditional but practical values are preserved and still prevail:

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs any more.

"Everyday Use" 51

The third house could represent the hypothetical time when objects and products from heritage could be used for purposes other than they are supposed to:

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.

"Everyday Use" 58

Thirdly, we have the most representative symbol of "Everyday Use": the quilts. Quilts are made of patches or fragments (Baker 2); of "bits and pieces of worthless rags" (Walker, *In Search* 239), but which contain the mark of the African-American ancestors - their grandmothers - when they were quilted. Thus, a quilt which practically has no economic value due to his lack of pattern and its materials' simplicity, turns out to be a priceless artifact which represents the link between the past - the African-American past - and the present through different hands and patches of different generations in a same family. In White's words (1), quilts symbolize a bond between women, and in the short story the bond is given "between women of several generations." The quilts in "Everyday Use" are made of scraps of dresses "pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee" ("Everyday Use" 56). Even some patches were

stitched by Dee/Wangero's and Maggie's Great Grandmother, who used bits of the uniform of Great Grandpa Ezra, who wore it in the Civil War. According to Cowart, quilts connect Dee/Wangero and Maggie's generation to prior generations, and in practical terms Maggie will be the one who could continue with the quilt-making legacy, since she is the only one who knows stitching: " 'She can always make some more,' [...] 'Maggie knows how to quilt' " ("Everyday Use" 58). Both daughters appreciate these quilts as well as the legacy and heritage they contain in the stitches, but each of them gives a different value to these works of art which Baker Jr. and Pierce-Baker call a "kaleidoscopic and momentary array" (2). Maggie, being conscious of her family bonds and the heritage she has been transferred only belonging to the community of African-Americans, loves the quilts. However, she does not need a physical proof to be aware of her folklore, as illustrated below:

"She [Dee/Wangero] 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."

"Everyday Use" 58

On the other hand, we have Dee/Wangero and the period of life she is living, which inevitably has much to do concerning her appreciation towards these objects. As we are explained through Mama's words, Dee/Wangero rejected the quilts when she was younger: "I [Mama] didn't want to bring up how I offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told me they were old-fashioned, out of style" ("Everyday Use 57). Nevertheless, some years later and especially, taking into account the period the story takes place, the Sixties - the period of Black Power and the African-American values' empowerment - , Dee/Wangero demonstrates a curiosity and rather an anxious appreciation of the quilts. Furthermore, Dee/Wangero believes that the treatment she would give to the objects projecting the traditional African-American past is the correct one, and in fact, she does not hesitate passing over her sister and even humiliating her:

"The truth is," I [Mama] said, "I promised to give them quilts to Maggie, for when she marries John Thomas."

"Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she [Dee/Wangero] said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

Taking into account that quilts represent a bond between women from different generations and that they have not been forgotten thanks to those next generations who have continued stitching them, they receive a practical value: they are quilted and they are used. Hence, Dee/Wangero would be underestimating the quilts' importance - and she even does so insulting her sister - and giving them a much more frivolous use such as "hanging them" (58), as her mother lets us know: "as if that was the only thing you could do with quilts" (58).

Finally, we have some more symbols in the story which in a smaller extent allegorize the heritage connection through women. Devices such as the butter churn symbolize as well the connection of Mama with her ancestors:

When she finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and stash had lived.

"Everyday Use" 56

The extract depicts how Mama is symbolically touching the hands of her ancestors when she takes the dasher in her hands (White 2). These objects, the same as quilts, have a practical value since they also receive an everyday use: they were made by "Aunt Dee's first husband" ("Everyday Use" 55) but they are still used in the moment the story happens: "She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber by now" (58).

All things considered, it is visible how Alice Walker uses different devices to symbolize the bond between women from different generations. Each character in the short story manifest adherence to these devices, and each one values the objects in her own way. Unfortunately, the manner in which each character appreciates these objects does not match with one another; what is more, according to Mama, the guide and the

judge of the story, their ways to appreciate heritage may be or may not be correct, which is the case of Dee/Wangero.

6. 2. Mama, Maggie and Dee/Wangero: bearers of heritage

As we have explained before, each protagonist in "Everyday Use" has her own manner to understand heritage, and these factors affect on the way family relationships are created. However, the position adopted by each of them does not match with the rest. Hence, each character does not agree on the perspective endorsed by her relatives.

Dee/Wangero, for instance, is defined by her mother as beautiful and stylish: "At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was" ("Everyday Use" 50). Through the point of view of Mama, we get to understand that Dee or Wangero is rather a presumptuous and spoilt girl who wants everything and who is unable to receive a negative answer. As Mama affirms:

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.

"Everyday Use" 50

Nevertheless, she has chosen another way of life. She has received an education and as Cowart specifies, "she has escaped the ghetto" (172). Instead of living in the black suburbs Mama and Maggie live, she lives outside. Besides, as the story lets us know, she has leant towards the movements of black power: "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" ("Everyday Use" 53) and "It's really a new day for us" (59). Likewise, even if she wants to reject her American past and follows the fashion of rediscovering the African-American roots - "Wa-su-zo-Teano" is her Lugandan salutation -, she admires her heritage. We just have to observe how every device that involves a generational history "delighted her" (55), although this delight may be due to the trends that guide her through the decade the story takes place. In her conception of heritage, she wants to give some new fresh air to what Mama and Maggie understand about appreciating it:

"Well," I [Mama] said, stumped. "What would you do with them [the quilts]?"

"Hang them," she [Dee/Wangero] said.

"Everyday Use" 58

We ought to say that the conception that Dee/Wangero has about understanding heritage may not be the most accurate; it could be said that she is rejecting it only adopting her African past but getting rid of the American. Additionally, ironically Dee/Wangero is the only character who uses the word "heritage" and she uses it to reprehend her mother and sister (Cowart 172):

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said.

"Everyday Use" 59

All things considered, it seems understandable Mama refusing to give Dee/Wangero the quilts. She does so with a determination learnt from Dee/Wangero's "pride and refusal to back down" (S. Farrell 1373), since as Mama says, "I did something I never had done before" ("Everyday Use" 58).

Concerning Mama, only reading the extract in which she describes herself we would be able to imagine that she is a tough woman who has known overcoming life's difficulties, as it is suggested below:

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.

"Everyday Use" 48

Mama considers she has already worked enough and all she wants to do is to enjoy the time left with simple and daily activities such as just sitting in the yard and

singing church songs. Mama also shows an evident conformity regarding life: she has not been educated but she did not need to. Besides, she considers that people from the decade the short story is set complain too much. As she clarifies, "in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now" ("Everyday Use" 50). However, Mama accepts her daughter's revolutionary changes - such is the case of Dee/Wangero's dress, which at first impacts Mama but finally likes it - and remembers her as a "determined fighter" (S. Farrell 1369). Farrell goes on by claiming that Mama is intrigued by her daughter ideals and she grudgingly respects and even envies Dee/Wangero's self-determination and willingness to fight (1371):

Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye.

"Everyday Use" 49

However, Mama does not share with Dee/Wangero the same perspectives about heritage, and she feels that Dee/Wangero is not being loyal to prior generations with the use the latter plans to give to the quilts. For that very reason, Mama decides to give the quilts to Maggie. According to S. Farrell (1373), with that triumphant action Mama combines both Maggie's respect for tradition and Dee/Wangero's determination and pride.

Maggie is described by Mama as a scary, timid and insecure person. As Mama recounts, she has been like this since the fire burned the other house "to the ground" ("Everyday Use" 49) and marked her eternally with "burn scars down her arms and legs" (47). Maggie, the same as Mama, is both suspicious and attracted by the unknown and the newness Dee/Wangero brings to the house, as we are told in the story:

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. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that "no" is a word the world never learned to say to her.

"Everyday Use" 47

According to White (4), throughout the story Mama has let us know that she is disappointed and even ashamed of Maggie. Nevertheless, when Maggie offers the quilts to Dee/Wangero, Mama becomes aware of Maggie's strength as well as her powerful boundaries with her past:

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

"Everyday Use" 58

In Tuten's words (125), this realization is important since it represents the creation of a powerful connection between mother and daughter. Tuten goes on stating that with this action, Mama would be responding to silent messages that Maggie has been sending her for some time, and which Mama was unable to accept. From this moment on Maggie and Mama "are allied" (Tuten 126) and this connection and realization will make Maggie smile, "but a real smile, not scared" ("Everyday Use" 59).

7. Conclusion

As we have said, in "Everyday Use" Alice Walker portrays the dilemma of being loyal to one's roots, in this case, to both the African and American roots. Most critics and readers of the short story have pointed out that whereas Dee/Wangero does not appreciate as she ought to her roots - as Cowart affirms, she falls into the act of deracination - , the shy and insecure Maggie and the practical Mama are the "correct" ones to keep the legacy. However, this statement does not have to be irrefutable, since in a story entirely charged with a thematic referring to heritage, traditional and familial values, as well as subjects concerning the contemporary times, each character gives her own perspective and her own appreciation to the African-American heritage. Nevertheless, it is Mama who recounts the story and inevitably she becomes Alice Walker's voice when she makes us understand that it does not work showing interest towards heritage only when it is convenient. Mama understands and respects Dee/Wangero's ideology and viewpoint concerning heritage, but she lets us understand that Dee/Wangero's position is not the most appropriate, since in an attempt to find her

roots, she is getting rid of an indispensable part of her heritage. As Mama would say, "I love you my dear, but first things first." Or, in other words, do not forget where you come from.

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