

Name

Professor

Course

Date

English Comp. II: Symbolism

Introduction

In Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," the plain narrative of a reunion with a daughter is powerfully reinforced by symbols which "do the work" of explanation. More than a few symbols are effective in the story in this way, but the most significant are the clothing of Dee and the quilts that become the objects of conflict. The symbols of Dee's dress and the old quilts in Walker's "Everyday Use" represent the changed identity of a daughter, and the gulf that may grow between a parent and child, when each attaches different meaning to a simply family artifact.

The Symbolism

The impact of Dee's dress in the story is set in place from the opening of Mama's narrative, and by virtue of the symbolic contrast the clothing creates. To begin with, this is a hard world, yet one clearly valued by the mother and daughter surviving within it. Mama then recalls the daughter who has been away, and it is clear that she has never fully understood this child. Dee has always been different: "She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature" (Walker). The stage is set for contrast, and exploring the tensions between black mothers and daughters is a hallmark of much of Walker's fiction (Brown-Guillory 120). Before Dee's visit, Mama relates just how this tension existed, as the educated Dee forced her mother and sister to listen to her reading: "She....burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily

need to know” (Walker). Dee's entrance in the clothing symbolically expands both her character as being alien to Mama: “A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun” (Walker). This symbolic inability of the mother to take in her daughter reflects Walker's own sense of being distanced from her own family, and, like Dee, by virtue of education and broader life experience (Edemariam). Nonetheless, the point remains that the dress is an expression of Dee's identity, which Mama cannot understand.

More than this, however, the quilts wanted by Dee are powerfully symbolic of the innate differences in values of mother and daughter; they go to individual ideas of lifestyle (Hall, Hall 550). Just hearing that the material was handed down by several generations of the family's women has an emotional effect on Dee: “‘Imagine!’ she breathed again, clutching them closely to her bosom” (Walker). For Dee, they represent pride in her race and culture. Only one use for them is right: “‘Hang them,’ she said. As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts” (Walker). For Mama, however, the meaning is very different. Critics note that Walker has nothing to do with any romanticizing of Africa, which was widely done by black authors in the 1960s (Moore 113), and this goes to Mama's inability to perceive the quilts beyond their utility. Opposed perceptions of the quilts, then, create the symbolic meaning of them.

Conclusion

Due to two important forms of symbolism, Alice Walker's story is enabled to be expanded beyond the narrative of what is occurring. Dee's striking clothing represents her persona as radically different from her mother's and sister's, just as her longing for the old quilts, opposed by her mother, renders the quilts themselves symbolic of the distance between the two. Dee's dress and the old quilts in Walker's “Everyday Use” are very powerful symbols, as they represent the

unsettling and different nature of a daughter, and how contrary perceptions of a thing's real value illustrate the opposing viewpoints of a parent and child.

Works Cited

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