

Final Project II Submission: Final Paper

For my Milestone Project, I have chosen to focus on the short story “Everyday Use,” by Alice Walker. I had read this piece in a previous class and enjoyed the story it told and the history behind it. African American struggles are a common theme seen throughout this short story and I wanted to see how Walker brought attention to this sensitive topic. Theorists utilize literary theory to break down literature into many different facets. Be it form, structure, author history, culture, etc. these categories are considered of utmost importance. Brewton writes, “Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations” (Brewton). Some literature can evoke many theories and be open to much interpretation. It is imperative to keep an open mind and know that theories continue to evolve.

New Historicism is a theory that will be applied to the short story, “Everyday Use.” The theory correlates well with the historical context of this story. Bertens states, “The literary text, then, is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social, and economic dispensation. Far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly involved in history” (Bertens 155). The main principle used when looking through a New Historicism lens would be to interpret Walker’s life through the social or political influences that affected her, and how that got incorporated into her work. The Purdue Writing Lab states, “This school, influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time” (Purdue Writing Lab). Paying close attention to historical context when looking at literature is critical in this theory.

Another way one can interpret this text through a New Historicism lens would be to keep your thoughts subjective, as opinions of what occurred during that time are different from other points of view and experiences. The Purdue Writing Lab affirms, “New Historicists do not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture and that “...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact” (Purdue Writing Lab). Keeping an open mind and trying to envision yourself back in this era will help in understanding the oppression that was endured and how that affected African Americans. This will then enable one to utilize this theoretical lens in relation to this piece.

A New Historian might ask the question, “Does “Everyday Use,” support or condemn historical events?” (Purdue Writing Lab). Walker does support historical events that occurred around her time in “Everyday Use.” If we take a look at Walker’s life, we need to go back in time to when this story was written. There was a movement making its way into the African American culture, as their historical contributions were getting the recognition they deserved. This played a major role in the creation of Walker’s story. Culture and heritage are made known through the mother, as well as her two daughters. The historical context of this story concentrates on three kinds of women that Walker felt were missing in American Literature. Washington writes, “... the character who is physically and psychologically abused and who may retreat into insanity as a result; the character who is conflicted about wanting to be part of the American mainstream while fighting to find her own identity; and the character who asserts her agency and autonomy” (Walker 2). The three kinds of women are made known through Mama, Dee (oldest daughter), and Maggie (youngest daughter).

Two of these 'women' are particularly important when focusing on the history of this time period. The first one is Mama, and she would fit under the 'asserting her agency and autonomy' category. We see this when she seems proud of her work ethic, especially during a time when women's empowerment was making itself known. Walker composes, "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" (Walker). Being both mother and father to her girls, Mama displays a hard work ethic and unconditional love that is apparent in her strong character.

Another important role is seen in Dee who is characterized as trying to find her own identity and wanting to be part of the American mainstream. Christian writes, "...about Walker as both a participant in and critic of the Black Power and women's movements of the 1960's and 1970's. Walker's critique of Black Power movement ideologues and advocates can be seen in her portrayal of Dee" (Walker 2). Walker writes,

"No, Mama," she says. "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"

"What happened to 'Dee'?" I wanted to know.

"She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" (Walker).

Dee is trying to show her way of defiance against those who afflicted her by changing her name from a family name to a name that is of more African descent. Society at the time made a big impact on Walker and how she wrote this story, specifically the Black Power and Women's Movements.

Critical Race Theory is the second theory that will be applied to this short story. This theory relates well to the story as its focus relies heavily on racism transforming due to Civil Rights. The Purdue Writing Lab states, “Closely connected to such fields as philosophy, history, sociology, and law, CRT scholarship traces racism in America through the nation’s legacy of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and recent events” (Purdue Writing Lab). One principle used when looking through a Critical Race lens would be to allow the reader to experience oppression through Walker’s story. In “Everyday Use,” conversations referring to the Civil War, oppression, poverty, and white men connect to the fundamentals of the Critical Race Theory. As racism is still prevalent in society today, we want to look at this story through the lens that lets us try to understand this persecution, respond to it, and eliminate it all together.

Another principle we can encounter through Walker’s piece is institutionalized racism. This refers to the restrictions placed on a specific group of people and the opportunities they are allowed to access or more notably, not access. The Purdue Writing Lab adds, “These inequalities, which include an individual’s access to material conditions and power, are not only deeply embedded in legal institutions, but have been absorbed into American culture to such a degree that they are often invisible or easily overlooked” (Purdue Writing Lab). Through Walker’s piece, we can begin to see how history and society have shaped how certain freedoms were denied. Specifically, in Walker’s story, how a good education was costly and not offered to everyone of different races. Walker portrays this principle when writing about the education of Dee. She was the only daughter that was able to attend a decent school where she gained knowledge about her studies and the woman she wanted to become. Stowell writes, “After the fire, Mama and her church raised money to send Dee away to school, only to have Dee return and shame Mama and Maggie for their lack of education and ignorance. Dee has always wanted

nice things and was determined to get them. While she will go on to do big things, Maggie will stay home and prepare to marry a local man and their mother will remain in a house that is a duplicate of the one they lost” (Stowell). Dee used her education, strong will, and a love for a new African heritage to rise above oppression and face adversity. Mama and Maggie will remain grounded in their heritage, but also subject to the discrimination that overshadows their lives.

A Critical Race Theorist might ask the question, “Can “Everyday Use” accurately reflect the experiences of victims of racism?” (Purdue Writing Lab). One could argue that you certainly can accurately reflect the experiences victims have faced pertaining to racism. An account that can attest to this is seen in the words of Walker’s story. Mama daydreams of a happy reunion with Dee on the Johnny Carson show; where African Americans and white people can co-exist in harmony. In reality, Mama shakes off that thought and knows of the oppression she faces daily. Walker writes, “28Who 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 fumed in whichever way is farthest from them” (Walker). We don’t know what has happened in Mama or her ancestor’s past that created this mindset, but we can be sure that racism was a large part of their existence. The following passage emanates a power struggle between races and how they didn’t have a say in much, including their education. Walker states, “I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down. Don’t ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now” (Walker). With Mama’s belief that African Americans were not allowed to advocate for themselves, she depicts an outlook that has endured and continues to endure an oppressive past. The mentality of being inferior is a saddening undertone to Mama’s character.

The changes that were apparent after looking at “Everyday Use,” through a New Historicism and Critical Race lens gives one a new appreciation of the historical implications that attributed to racism, how that continued to affect generations that followed these harsh times, and also in what manner these prejudices were overcome. Mama worked hard to provide the best life she could for her girls, but it was difficult as an African American woman who was still aggrieved by the ‘white man’ and the past. Dee’s resilient personality is constantly trying to rise above her born status and conquer any adversity that clung to her heritage. Both characters are the cornerstone of this piece and give the reader a first-hand account of what it was like to live during these oppressive times. Utilizing these theories can open one’s mind to new encounters that might never have been acknowledged. Gaining literary insight while expanding on your knowledge of a text is of utmost importance. Looking through a different lens allows a newfound understanding and appreciation of literature.

Works Cited

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