Analysis(Sparknote)

The Meaning of Heritage

Angered by what she views as a history of oppression in her family, Dee has constructed a new heritage for herself and rejected her real heritage. She fails to see the family legacy of her given name and takes on a new name, Wangero, which she believes more accurately represents her African heritage. However, the new name, like the “African” clothes and jewelry she wears to make a statement, is meaningless. She has little true understanding of Africa, so what she considers her true heritage is actually empty and false. Furthermore, Dee views her real heritage as dead, something of the past, rather than as a living, ongoing creation. She desires the carved dasher and family quilts, but she sees them as artifacts of a lost time, suitable for display but not for actual, practical use. She has set herself outside her own history, rejecting her real heritage in favor of a constructed one.

Mama and Dee have very different ideas about what “heritage” is, and for Mama, the family objects are infused with the presence of the people who made and used them. The family heirlooms are the true tokens of Dee’s identity and origins, but Dee knows little about the past. She misstates the essential facts about how the quilts were made and what fabrics were used to make them, even though she pretends to be deeply connected to this folk tradition. Her desire to hang the quilts, in a museum like exhibit, suggests that she feels reverence for them but that to her they are essentially foreign, impersonal objects. Mama understands that Maggie, not Dee, should have the quilts, because Maggie will respect them by using them in the way they were intended to be used. When Dee contends at the end of the story that Mama and Maggie do not understand their heritage, Walker intends the remark to be ironic: clearly, it is Dee herself who does not understand her heritage.

The Divisive Power of Education

Although Mama struggled to send Dee to a good school, education proves to be more divisive than beneficial to Dee’s relationship with her family. Mama herself was denied an education. When she was a child, her school was closed, and no one attempted to try to reopen it. Racism, passive acceptance, and forces beyond her control set Mama on the road that led to her life of toil. Dee was fortunate that Mama gave her the opportunity for advantages and refinements, but they have served only to create a wedge between Dee and the rest of the family. Dee uses her intellect to intimidate others, greeting her mother with “Wa-su-zo Tean-o,” a greeting in an obscure African language Mama most likely doesn’t speak. Dee, with her knowledge and worldliness, is a threat to the simple world Mama and Maggie inhabit, and Dee seems determined to lord her knowledge over them. Even as a child, Dee read to her mother and sister “without pity,” “forcing” strange ideas on them and unsettling their simple domestic contentment.

Education has separated Dee from her family, but it has also separated Dee from a true sense of self. With lofty ideals and educational opportunity came a loss of a sense of heritage, background, and identity, which only family can provide. Dee arrives at the family home as a strange, threatening ambassador of a new world, a world that has left Maggie and Mama behind. Civil rights, greater visibility, and zero tolerance for inequality are characteristics of Dee’s world. These things are not, in and of themselves, problematic. What’s problematic is that Dee has no respect for anything but her world, leading her to alienate herself from her roots. Maggie, on the other hand, knows no world but the one she came from. Uneducated, she can read only haltingly. By doing what she is told and accepting the conditions of her sheltered life without question, Maggie has hampered her own self-fulfillment. Walker sets up this contrast to reveal an ironic contradiction: Dee’s voracious quest for knowledge has led to her alienation from her family, while the lack of education has harmed and stifled Maggie. Both education and the lack of it have proven to be dangerous for the sisters.

Motifs

Eye Contact and Eyesight

Throughout the story, the presence or absence of eye contact and strong eyesight reveals the difficulty that Mama, Dee, and Maggie have in relating to one another and, in Maggie and Mama’s case, to the outside world. Mama is unable to look a white person in the eye, suggesting that she has never managed to embrace the idea of equality, whereas Dee can do so easily. Maggie can’t look anyone in the eye at all, hanging her head as she walks, portraying herself as a silent victim. In describing Maggie’s ability to read, Mama says that Maggie does the best she can despite not being able to see well. This qualified vision is associated with a lack of intelligence or mental acuity. Walker describes Dee as wide-eyed, always taking in the world around her. During the house fire that happened when she was a child, she was transfixed by the flames consuming the home that, to her, represented ignorance and poverty. Mama claims Dee’s attention was often so rapt that she would not blink for long stretches of time. Dee’s easy eye contact and intense gazes reveal her critical, condescending nature. Soon after arriving at the family home, Dee and Hakim send “eye signals” to each other, silently registering their disdain for Mama and Maggie’s simple, rustic world.

Naming and Renaming

The act of naming—or, in Dee’s case, renaming—is a way of connecting to the past and an indication of the fluid nature of identity. Walker doesn’t tell us the origins of Maggie’s name, and Mama’s name is never given, but we know that these two characters are unchanging and have strong ties to their heritage. It therefore makes sense that their names and identities are stable and unremarkable. Dee, on the other hand, attempts to transform herself and embrace what she considers her true heritage by adopting an African name. Her boyfriend, Hakim-a-barber, may have taken on his name for similar reasons, as he grew to embrace Muslim ideas. Renaming is a sign of these two characters’ attempts to leave behind their true selves by taking on a new identity. Dee believes that the name Wangero holds more power and significance than Dee, the name passed down through four generations. Dee’s belief that she was named after her oppressors shows a critical lack of understanding. Quick to judgment, she sees her given name as an emblem of a racist, abusive world, as opposed to a tribute to a long line of strong women. Dee’s decision to take on a new name highlights the confused views she has of her own heritage.

Symbols

Quilts

“Everyday Use” focuses on the bonds between women of different generations and their enduring legacy, as symbolized in the quilts they fashion together. This connection between generations is strong, yet Dee’s arrival and lack of understanding of her history shows that those bonds are vulnerable as well. The relationship between Aunt Dicie and Mama, the experienced seamstresses who made the quilts, is very different from the relationship between Maggie and Dee, sisters who share barely a word and have almost nothing in common. Just as Dee cannot understand the legacy of her name, passed along through four generations, she does not understand the significance of the quilts, which contain swatches of clothes once worn or owned by at least a century’s worth of ancestors.

The quilts are pieces of living history, documents in fabric that chronicle the lives of the various generations and the trials, such as war and poverty, that they faced. The quilts serve as a testament to a family’s history of pride and struggle. With the limitations that poverty and lack of education placed on her life, Mama considers her personal history one of her few treasures. Her house contains the handicrafts of her extended family. Instead of receiving a financial inheritance from her ancestors, Mama has been given the quilts. For her, these objects have a value that Dee, despite professing her desire to care for and preserve the quilts, is unable to fathom.

The Yard

Mama’s yard represents a private space free of the regrets and shortcomings that have infiltrated Mama’s life. The yard appears in the first and last sentences of the story, connecting the events and bookending the action. The yard has been meticulously prepared for Dee’s arrival. Mama is sensitive to every detail of the yard’s appearance, referring to the wavy designs she and Maggie have made in the dirt as they tidied it. Mama extols the comforts of the yard, comparing it to an extended living room. In many ways, Mama prefers the yard to the confining house, where the muggy air fails to circulate freely. The outdoors is a place of freedom, whereas the interior of the house offers restraint and discomfort. The tense discussion about who gets the quilts takes place inside, where the various objects provoke Dee’s desire to reconnect with her past. In contrast, the yard is a blissful escape, a place where Mama’s regrets can be sidestepped. For her and Maggie, the yard evokes safety, a place where they can exert what little control they have over their environment.