

Summary of “Everyday Use”

In “Everyday Use,” Mama, the story’s first-person narrator, describes her relationship to her daughter Dee as Dee, an educated young African American woman, returns to visit her childhood house in the Deep South.

The story begins as Mama and Maggie, Dee’s sister, and Mama’s younger daughter, prepare for the visit. Maggie changes her clothes as Mama fantasizes about reconciling with her daughter on a television show hosted by someone like Johnny Carson. Mama then dismisses her fantasy as unrealistic because she believes she is not the kind of person who would appear on such a show. As she waits for Dee, Mama looks around the yard and at Maggie, triggering memories of Dee’s troubled childhood in their house—her anger towards her family and their poverty, her hunger for higher quality clothes and an education, her charisma, assertiveness, and her beauty. Mama thinks about how Dee’s attitude towards them changed as she became educated thanks to money from Mama and the Church, turning her from hateful to hurtfully condescending. As she remembers Dee as a child, Mama contrasts her with Maggie—a diffident, kind, homely young woman with a scar on her face from the house fire. Mama recounts the traumatizing fire, which burnt down their home, and forced them to build a new one, exactly like it, where they now live.

At last Dee and her partner, Hakim-a-Barber, arrive at the house. Dee is dressed in a beautiful, colorful, floor-length dress in African style. She introduces herself as “Wangero,” not as Dee, stating that she changed her name so she would not be named after her “oppressors.” Mama is originally skeptical of both these choices but decides that she likes the dress. Mama reminds Dee that she is, in fact, named after her aunt Dicie, but agrees to call Dee by her chosen name. Dee takes pictures of her family with their house.

She and Hakim-a-Barber eat with Mama and Maggie, and while Hakima-Barber is unenthusiastic about the family’s fare, Dee enjoys the collard greens and pork with relish.

Dee, who, as Mama mentioned, once disdained the family’s possessions, now unexpectedly covets them. She admires the worn stools, coos over her grandmother’s butter dish, and demands to be given the top of the family’s butter churn to use as decoration in her house. Mama acquiesces and gives Dee the churn.

After dinner, Dee insists on taking home her grandmother’s quilts as well, to hang on her walls. Mama, however, had planned on giving the quilts to Maggie. When Mama refuses, saying that she promised them to Maggie, Dee becomes angry. She insists that Maggie cannot appreciate the quilts and will wear them out with “everyday use.” When Mama brushes Dee’s anger off, saying that Maggie can simply make new quilts since she knows how to sew, Dee insists that the quilts are “priceless”, and that Mama does not “understand” her heritage. Still, Mama refuses to give Dee the quilts, and dumps them on Maggie’s lap.

The story ends with Dee’s departure, leaving Mama and Maggie alone together in the house.

Symbols: the house; the quilts

Themes: heritage; education

Churchill, Katherine. "Everyday Use." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Jan 2017.