

Destroying to Save: Idealism and Pragmatism in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

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In his report following the battle for Ben Tre during the Vietnam War, Peter Arnett quotes an American officer as saying, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it" (256). The statement was quickly used by others to epitomize the inanity, insanity, and insidious contradictions that characterized the Vietnam War specifically as well as war in general. But the statement also epitomizes a phenomenon that greatly informs the American experience and perhaps even Western civilization, too: the tension between, the overlapping of, and the positive correlation between idealism and pragmatism. And it is my contention that a thorough examination, and the resulting understanding, of these two concepts within American discourse may make major contributions toward averting colossal tragedies such as the Vietnam War (not to mention our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan) and also toward breaking the deadlocks in our overly contentious and bitter public dialogue.

Certainly, the study of the literature of the United States has a role in such an examination as literature serves as both a repository and a conduit for a society's discourse. The first challenge, then, due to the plethora of relevant subjects, is with what text to begin. Taking something from early in the American literary tradition would, of course, be a logical approach. But instead, I would like to examine a more recent text, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," for a few reasons. One, the brevity of the piece allows for an examination that is thorough but within the constraints required by the medium of a journal. And, two,

the story dramatizes both the ordinary and the extraordinary in ways that help us to understand how the examination I propose informs the discourse across the spectrum.

Mary Alice Pagliasotti observes, “Like pornography, idealism and pragmatism deny easy definition but are recognizable nonetheless” (295). Reviewing the small amount of literary scholarship on the subject supports this observation. In his 1941 article, “Pragmatism and Idealism in Literature,” J. Gordon Eaker writes, “pragmatism discounts the ideas that go beyond an immediate situation of stimulus and response” (458), and he also says, “idealism shows more clearly how art, with its greater selectivity and concentration, with a form more perfect than that which ordinary experience possesses, can be depended upon to hold up the pattern for conduct” (460). These definitions can be boiled down to this: pragmatism privileges existing circumstances and proceeds toward the most feasible and advantageous ends; idealism privileges what should be—the “ideal”—and pursues it no matter how lofty or ultimately unattainable. The persistence of both mindsets in the American imagination is generally accepted. Indeed, in his 1942 article, “The Value of Emerson Today,” Floyd Stovall observes, “It has been often said that there are two sides to the typical American character and that these two opposite sides are represented by the idealism of Jonathan Edwards and the pragmatism of Benjamin Franklin” (442-43). Since these two approaches are taken as polar opposites, it comes as no surprise that they propose conflicting courses of action for a given circumstance. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that these two approaches are often utilized as rationales for conflicting ends. In any event, it is not unusual for our debates to be cast as one side’s idealism against the other side’s pragmatism.

Deconstruction prompts us to distrust the polarity of binary oppositions, however, and to consider how they may be distinct elements that are inextricably interconnected. Such interconnection means that binary oppositions have more in common

than not. In the case of idealism and pragmatism, it is not that one is good and the other is evil but that both have the potential to be *both good and evil*. Or, perhaps more to the point, every idealistic pursuit involves pragmatic action, and every pragmatic pursuit implicates some ideal. And this understanding is crucial because it reveals the instabilities in polarized debates and uncovers the wider issues at stake.

Even though he is marginal to the conflict in “Everyday Use,” I want to discuss the character of Hakim, as his presence is significant to the topic at hand, and discussing him provides some entry into the concepts I want to explore. While never explicitly stated, one may surmise that Hakim is—or considers himself to be—a Black Muslim. The story infers this by his greeting of “Asalamalakim” (52), his refusal of pork at the meal and calling it “unclean” (55), and the mother’s own inference, saying to him, “You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road” (54). His alliance with Black Islam seems to portray Hakim as idealistically-minded for that community’s defiance of racism and promotion of African-American independence and self-initiative. Indeed, the story implies that, in the words of David Cowart, the “nearby Muslim commune is an admirable, even heroic, institution” (173). Certainly, the mother’s admiration for the commune for its refusal to succumb to racist threats is apparent. She says of them, “When 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” (54). In this way, Black Islam embodies the ideals of African-American pride and empowerment.

But the pursuit of these ideals is maintained through practical means. The mother says of the commune’s members, “Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt-lick shelters, throwing down hay” (54). And Cowart concludes that “the neighboring Muslims have immersed themselves in agrarian practicality” (173). The purpose of the commune, undoubtedly, is to provide its members with enough economic

support to be self-sufficient, thereby reducing the influence from those on the outside who do not share the commune's ideals. Moreover, the overt threat made on the commune is not idealistic but practical—poisoning the cattle, the commune's primary means of economic support. Or, more accurately, the poisoning threatens the commune's ideals through its practical support as the two are interconnected.

Hakim, however, does not appear to be a good representative of these or any other ideals. He acts respectful when he greets the mother and Maggie. But he soon behaves in a rather pretentious manner when he tries to shake hands with Maggie in a "fancy" way she does not know and then "soon gives up on" her (53). Rather than considering a form of greeting with which Maggie would most likely be familiar, or rather than taking the time to teach her something new, Hakim does just enough to demonstrate what he knows; his actions are self-serving rather than relationship-building. More significantly, Hakim's initial respect for the mother is undermined by the condescension he and Dee/Wangero¹ exhibit during the conversation they have over Dee/Wangero's decision to change her name. At one point, the mother observes, "He just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head" (54). Here, Hakim looks down on the mother not only literally but also figuratively, giving the impression that he is rather shallow and self-centered, far from idealistic.

¹Identifying this character poses a challenge to critics. Her given name is "Dee," and she is largely (though not exclusively) identified by that term in the story itself. However, she makes it clear that she prefers to be called "Wangero," and the mother makes some attempt to comply with this wish. Some critics will continue to use her given name while others address her by her chosen name. I attempt to have it both ways by identifying her as "Dee/Wangero" (despite its awkwardness) because both names and their implications are vital to the story's dynamics. In a sense, one may think of "Dee/Wangero" as the binary oppositions with which the character struggles, which in turn may inform the issues of African-American identity and identification.

Yet Hakim is seen as most pragmatic in his response to the mother’s question about his affiliation with the commune. When she asks if he is one of them, he responds, “I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style” (55). By stating that the hard, hands-on labor of the commune is not his “style,” Hakim unwittingly reveals the limitation of his idealism and the extent of his pragmatism. He will “accept [...] doctrines,” but whatever support he lends for their maintenance cannot cramp his “style.” Certainly, it is this laughable notion that the practical support for ideals must accord with a sense of style that infers that Hakim embraces Black Islam not out of a sense of devotion but out of a sense of personal fulfillment that does not go so far as making sacrifices or promoting community (as the members of the commune do). Of course, it would be a mistake to condemn Hakim too vigorously; he follows a long line of idealists who could not or would not submit to the practical rigors of communal life. The significant point to remember is that his character serves as a basic introduction for the ways ideals can be employed to mask one’s pragmatic pursuits.

But the portrayal of Hakim as idealistically superficial pales in comparison to that of Dee/Wangero. Indeed, most readers see her in a negative light despite the admirable ideals she maintains. Undoubtedly, this is due in part to the story’s narrative perspective. This is the mother’s story, and she tells it in the first person. Dee/Wangero is her antagonist, and the mother does a good job portraying herself in a sympathetic light. So it is no surprise that many readers take the mother’s cue to find fault in the older daughter.² I also believe, however, that part of the

²The mother is not without her shortcomings, however. Particularly, her speech and behavior strongly suggest that she has conflicted thoughts and feelings toward both of her daughters as well as herself. Toward Dee/Wangero she exhibits pride, anger, envy, and resentment; toward Maggie she exhibits pride, guilt, sympathy, and disgust; toward herself she exhibits pride, inferiority, and shame. The ramifications of these issues are beyond the scope of this study, so it is necessary to point out that her attributes that do fall within the scope of this study, and therefore receive close examination here, do not exhaust the analysis of her character.

reason Dee/Wangero raises the hackles of so many readers is due to the way she demonstrates how people may attempt (in her case, unsuccessfully) to justify personal gain with high-flown ideals. In any event, this character most readily exemplifies how idealism and pragmatism are always already intertwined.

Dee/Wangero's ideals are revealed in her espousal of the Black Pride movement. She has left the family's rural and impoverished state in pursuit of a college education, and she returns with a strong appreciation for African heritage. The appreciation is initially shown in her manner of dress (the clothing consists of "yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun," earrings "hanging down to her shoulders," and "Bracelets dangling and making noises" [52]) that appears—at least stereotypically—African. Even more significantly, she now has taken an African name, Wangero, over her given, European-derived name, Dee. Dee/Wangero's sense of heritage is expressed further as she recognizes several household items to be significant folk artifacts. She marvels over "how lovely [the] benches are" (55). And she recognizes the ornamental potential of such implements by desiring to turn the butter churn top into a centerpiece and "to do something artistic with the dasher" (56). Yet her value of heritage is most seen in her appreciation of the mother's hand-sewn quilts. Rather than put them to use, Dee/Wangero wants to hang them, recognizing them as works of art. In fact, she even declares that "they're *priceless*" (57, emphasis original). Here, Dee/Wangero's belief that the worth of these heirlooms cannot be measured by money reflects an idealization of both her African and African-American heritage.

It is not difficult to discern the shortcomings in Dee/Wangero's ideals, however, and most critics of the story effectively point these out. But among the criticism I have found, only Susan Farrell discusses at length the positive attributes of the character. Farrell points out that "While Dee is certainly insensitive and selfish to a certain degree, she nevertheless offers a view of heritage and a strategy for contemporary Af-

rican-Americans to cope with an oppressive society that is, in some ways, more valid than that offered by Mama and Maggie” (179). Dee/Wangero understands the value of what the dominant society says is worthless. And as such, she recognizes the value of her heritage and herself. Also, while most critics discuss what is problematic about Dee/Wangero’s desire to change her name, Farrell brings the discussion back to the point that “Dee’s assertion that the name comes from ‘the people who oppress’ her is [. . .] accurate” (183). Dee/Wangero, more than any other character in the story, identifies and pursues corrective measures against the oppression of African-American society and culture. Or, again as Farrell puts it, “Dee refuses to meekly accept the status quo” (181).

But even Farrell admits that Dee/Wangero has her faults, and these can be collectively described as a failure to admit, both to herself and to her family, how her pragmatic concerns are intertwined with the ideals of heritage and Black Pride. The consensus among the critics concerning Dee/Wangero seems to be, in the words of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, that “Assured by the makers of American fashion that ‘black’ is currently ‘beautiful,’ she has conformed her own ‘style’ to that notion. Hers is a trendy ‘blackness’ cultivated as art and costume” (160). This is not to say there are not or should not be pragmatic advantages to the pursuit of ideals. Instead, Dee/Wangero demonstrates the detrimental consequences of failing to recognize how idealism and pragmatism are intertwined and how privileging one undermines both.

The chinks in Dee/Wangero’s idealistic armor are seen early in the story. For someone who claims a rich understanding of heritage, she is remarkably distant—economically, psychologically—from her closest connections to that heritage: her immediate family. Baker and Pierce-Baker (161), Raimund Borgmeier, Sam Whitsitt, and Charles E. Wilson (176) all make this point, in some way and in varying degrees, in relation to Dee/Wangero’s photography at the beginning of her visit. Borgmeier observes,

“It is as if before entering that scene Dee wants to make sure that she has a picture of herself not being part of the picture. She wants to frame that world, define its borders, give it wholeness which then allows her to handle it without being a part of it” (66). And Whitsitt says, “the Polaroid camera which Dee uses, even before she has greeted her mother, to take pictures, is an expression of a decorative taking-in and unfeeling consumer attitude” (448). Essentially, Dee/Wangero’s actions here suggest that she objectifies her family as much as the cultural artifacts she covets in the course of the narrative.

For numerous critics,³ the greatest demonstration of the disconnect between Dee/Wangero’s and the family’s heritage comes with her choice to take another name. While it is true that her given name is derived from European sources, it is also true that the name was given in remembrance of family members: her aunt, grandmother, and great grandmother as well as relatives “back beyond the Civil War” (54). In other words, her given name is something to celebrate if indeed she seeks connection with her family’s heritage. But this is not the case. Perhaps Joan S. Korenman puts it best:

Nowhere is Dee’s lack of real concern for her family’s heritage more apparent than in her explanation of her change of name. [. . .] However reasonable such sentiments may be in the abstract, Walker shows us that in fact Dee is not liberating herself from some distant white oppressor but is rather turning her back on her black female ancestors. (146)

Furthermore, Helga Hoel maintains that “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo,” the full name Dee/Wangero has chosen for herself, “is not an ordinary African name” (37). In tracing the etymologies of these names, Hoel concludes that Dee/Wangero may have chosen “names representing the whole East African region” but that “more likely, she is confused and has only a superficial knowledge of Africa and all it stands for” (37). Of course, one hesitates to find great fault for a lack of knowledge. (Indeed,

³See Borgmeier (62), Cowart (172), Farrell (183), and Wilson (177).

Dee/Wangero’s limited knowledge of all things African is still greater than what most Americans possess.) Nevertheless, the obviously self-defeating consequences and the narrowness of Dee/Wangero’s idealism prompt readers to doubt her sincerity and to wonder about her true motivations.

And her motivations, the text implies, are largely pragmatic. The mother says of Dee/Wangero’s reaction to the family home, “Everything delighted her. Even the fact that we still used the benches her daddy made for the table when we couldn’t afford to buy chairs” (55). To be delighted by the quaintness of the family’s home and possessions, Dee/Wangero must utterly ignore their poverty. Moreover, her appreciation for the intrinsic and aesthetic value of the household items seems to be tied to her senses of utility and possession. She says of the churn top, “This churn top is what *I* need” and “I can *use* this churn top as a centerpiece” (55, 56, emphasis mine). But she expresses no appreciation for the fact that the utensils she wants—the churn top and the dasher—are functional elements in the household’s economy. She sees the intrinsic value of the items, but she overlooks their utility for the mother and Maggie, and she fails to offer some compensation or replacement for them.

But, as the focal point of the story, Dee/Wangero’s desire for the two hand-sewn quilts most reveals her practical motivations. She employs a self-serving rhetoric to convince the mother that she should be given the quilts. She first asks, “‘Can I have these *old* quilts’” (56, emphasis mine). Her inclusion of “old” here implies that the quilts are not valuable and therefore giving them to her would be no loss. But when the mother resists the request on the basis that the quilts have been promised to Maggie, Dee/Wangero asserts, “‘Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts!’ [. . .] ‘She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use’” and “‘But they’re *priceless!*’ [. . .] ‘Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they’d be in rags. Less than that!’” (57, emphasis original). Once it is clear that someone else values the quilts, Dee/Wangero then, and only

then, idealizes the artifacts as works of art, claiming that they are too valuable for practical use.

If she had immediately spoken of the intrinsic value of the quilts and the need to preserve them, readers might find her desires laudable. By all indications, however, preserving the quilts and possessing the quilts are the same actions to her. Or, to put it another way, her increased pragmatism has prompted an increase in her idealism. It would be easy to see Dee/Wangero's idealism as a mask for her pragmatism, as a cynical tool to help her to realize her pragmatic concerns. But, surely, if her motives were purely selfish, she is intelligent enough to do a better job at concealing them. Instead, she seems to be the only one who does not recognize the pragmatic dimension of her desires. Because she lives in a society that often employs idealism as a rhetorical strategy to achieve pragmatic ends, she has learned to see the idealistic aims in her actions and to overlook their pragmatic ends. Thus she aestheticizes the family heirlooms and speaks of the appreciation she has of heritage, but she does not acknowledge how her possession of these objects would serve to gratify her ego. Rather than understanding how idealism and pragmatism are inextricably interconnected, Dee/Wangero asserts an ideal that is hollow because it is embraced purely for pragmatic ends. Ultimately, perhaps, readers tend to disapprove of Dee/Wangero because they recognize on some level that without her pragmatism she might not hold the particular ideals she expresses in the story.

Maggie, however, is the sister who initially appears to inhabit the pragmatic end of the idealism-pragmatism continuum. She ekes out an existence on the family farm and has neither the intelligence nor the physical attributes of Dee/Wangero. And she is expected to put the quilts to everyday use once she inherits them. But unlike Dee/Wangero (whose appreciation for the family's heritage is wholly abstract), Maggie has both an abstract and a concrete appreciation for the family's heritage.

This appreciation is expressed not only by her memory of the family members (prompting Dee/Wangero to offer that rather back-handed compliment, “‘Maggie’s brain is like an elephant’s’” [56]) but also by the fact that she has learned to quilt. The mother reveals, “It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her [Maggie] to quilt herself” (58). This fact is significant not only because it is Maggie who has taken up the family tradition but also because it indicates that Maggie has accepted what Dee/Wangero has not. That is, Maggie has learned quilting from Dee/Wangero’s namesakes, Grandma Dee and her aunt Big Dee. As a result, Borgmeier observes, “the right use of her heritage is not a theoretical question to Maggie but one of pragmatic succession. She is part of the domestic working world of the black woman, where the different generations work together and so pass on or take over their socio-economic heritage” (63). Thus, it is poignant when Dee/Wangero ponders the labor required to produce the quilts and, twice, says, “‘Imagine!’” (57). Yes, it is a comment expressing wonder and appreciation, but imagining the intensive labor of quilting is all she can do since she never took the opportunity to learn the craft at the feet of her expert family members. Figuratively speaking, Maggie has rescued the birthright that Dee/Wangero initially forsook and now tries to reclaim.

But the action that most reveals Maggie’s character is when she responds to the argument that the mother and Dee/Wangero have over the quilts. The mother narrates, “‘She can have them Mama,’ [Maggie] said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her, ‘I can ‘member Grandma Dee without the quilts’” (58). Certainly, Maggie’s selflessness is yet another strategy of the text to call attention to Dee/Wangero’s selfishness. Yet more significantly, as Whitsitt explains, “Maggie spites herself by offering to give up the quilts but in doing so announces her freedom through knowledge and memory, from the sign of that memory” (457). Or, in the terms of this study, because Maggie possesses a sense of heritage that

is both idealistic—in the sense of a deep and abiding appreciation—and pragmatic—in her ability to quilt—she does not need the material expression of heritage to retain, celebrate, and transmit that sense of heritage. And because of this freedom from materialism, it would be easy to overlook the mother's commentary here and read the moment as triumphant for Maggie. But such a reading would be a mistake. Instead, we should acknowledge the disappointment the mother hears in Maggie's response, sounding "like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her." The disappointment that Maggie expresses indicates that the quilts do matter to her; even though her sense of heritage cannot be lost with the loss of the quilts, her sense of heritage causes her to desire a practical, material expression of that heritage. Losing the quilts would not extinguish or reduce Maggie's sense of heritage, but it would rob her sense of heritage of an affirming token.

The mother is the character who appears to be the most practically minded. This pragmatism stems from necessity. She works hard on her farm, milking and slaughtering, because it needs to be done. She dresses pragmatically, saying, "In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day" (48)—unlike the fashionably attired Dee/Wangero. Most importantly for this reading, she has no qualms about the practical use of the hand-sewn quilts. When Dee/Wangero balks that Maggie would submit the quilts to use, the mother replies, "'I reckon she would' [. . .] 'God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!'" (57). The mother seems not only to express the pragmatic notion that the quilts *can* be used but also that because they were made to be used they *should* be used. The mother sees the world through practical eyes because to fail to do so would impede the survival of herself and her family. Or, as Wilson observes, "Neither frail nor weak, she has gained the strength required to survive in a world that would shackle her spiritual, physical, and intellectual growth" (175).

Yet with careful reading, one may see how the mother is not without her ideals. Specifically, she is not so practical that she cannot appreciate beauty even in common things.⁴ For example, she has taken the time to etch “tiny irregular grooves” in the sand around her bare-earth yard (47). But even more significantly, she not only understands the usefulness of the butter churn that Dee/Wangero appropriates, but she also sees its beauty in commenting, “It was [made of] beautiful light yellow wood” (56). So despite her hardscrabble life, the mother is not devoid of aesthetic values.

Of course, by this point, it would be a mistake to see the mother’s pragmatism and her idealism as diametrically opposed or as merely coincidental. Instead, they inextricably interconnect, springing forth as the result of each other. Again, Wilson observes,

As simple and unrefined as their lives may be, the Johnsons maintain a sense of understated dignity. The care they take in preparing the yard for Dee’s arrival is indicative of their deep pride in their domestic life. The carefully manicured grooves of sand reflect the order by which they guide their simple, practical, unassuming lives. (175)

The ideals of “dignity” and “pride” of which Wilson speaks serve the family’s practical needs and vice versa. The same holds true for the mother’s opinion of her own abilities. She says,

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 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. (48)

Clearly, the mother’s physical bearing and vocational skills are not those of the dominant society’s idealized woman; she is large and does the sort of work traditionally thought to be part of the

⁴Indeed, one may argue that her appreciation for beauty is more genuine because it does not appear to be derived from any received social standards.

male domain (she says elsewhere, “I was always better at a man’s job” [50]). But rather than apologizing for herself or viewing herself through the dominant society’s perspective, she obviously takes pride in herself and her skills. Thus the mother exemplifies the interconnection of idealism and pragmatism in the way her ideals and her practical endeavors facilitate each other.

And, as with Maggie and Dee/Wangero, the mother’s relationship with the quilts reveals much about this interconnection. For, like her daughters, the quilts inform her concept of heritage. Contrary to Dee/Wangero’s accusation of ignorance in these regards, the mother fosters a keen sense of heritage. As mentioned above, she can trace the lineage of her oldest daughter’s given name in the family “back beyond the Civil War” (54). She also knows the sources of the pieces of the quilts and their connections to the family: “In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War” (56). Obviously, the value of the quilts for the mother goes beyond their utility. The quilts represent family members and thus sustain their memory, which the mother undoubtedly wants to preserve for her children. Additionally, just as a quilt consists of individual pieces of fabric stitched together to form a whole, so too is a family a collection of individuals bound together. But rather than forsaking utility for the promotion of memory, the mother combines the two. Cowart approaches this circumstance in his statements:

For Maggie and her mother the idea of heritage is perpetually subordinate to the fact of a living tradition, a tradition in which one generation remains in touch with its predecessors by means of homely skills—quilt-making and butter-churning, among others—that get passed on. The quilts remain appropriate for “everyday use” so long as the art of their manufacture remains alive. They can be quite utilitarian, and indeed, they are supposed to be a practical dowry for Maggie. (179)

I agree for the most part but disagree that “the idea of heritage is perpetually *subordinate* to the fact of the living tradition” [emphasis mine]. Instead, I maintain that, for Maggie and the mother, heritage is the stitching together, literally as well as figuratively, of memory—abstract, ideal—with the living tradition, which is concrete and practical. Heritage is something that they both know and experience. To put the quilts on display would be to remove them from the living tradition, both in the sense that they would not be utilized as quilts and that their materials would not be available for future quilting, thus severely limiting the extent to which they may be experienced. So, again, for Maggie and her mother, the practical use of the quilts provides for the maintenance of their ideals and vice versa.

With all the wrangling over the quilts that takes place in the story, we should finally consider how the quilts themselves exemplify the interconnection between idealism and pragmatism. As previously discussed, the quilts epitomize the ideal of heritage for these characters. Or as Whitsitt explains, “The quilt ‘represents’ herstory, history, and tradition, binding women, and men, to the past and the past to the present” (445). But the quilts are more than these abstractions; they are material and functional; as Borgmeier, in discussing quilting in general, says, “the artifacts created are not museum pieces but by their nature [are] intended for everyday use” (65). The problem implied by the story is in seeing the idealistic and pragmatic aspects of the quilts as in competition with each other rather than as complementary to each other.

On the one hand, the quilt is functional: it keeps sleepers warm. Moreover, the materials of the quilt, typically, are gathered pragmatically, being taken from whatever discards are available such as “bits of overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses” (Baker and Pierce-Baker 149, 156). Since it is made from such things of little or no value, how could the quilt have value apart from its functionality? The answer by this point is obvious: the quilt is valued by people for the invest-

ments—in labor, in love, in relationships—that people have put into it. These investments may be made in numerous ways. For example, Baker and Pierce-Baker observe,

The transmutation of quilting, a European feminine tradition, into a black woman's folk art, represents an innovative fusion of African cloth manufacture, piecing, and appliqué with awesome New World experiences. The product that resulted was, in many ways, a double patch. The hands that pieced the master's rigidly patterned quilts by day were often the hands that crafted a more functional design in slave cabins by night. The quilts of Afro-America offer a *sui generis* context (a weaving together) of experiences and a storied, vernacular representation of lives conducted in the margins, ever beyond an easy and acceptable wholeness. (156)

Notice all of the ideals that are pursued either explicitly or implicitly in this observation: artistic and artisan innovation, creative expression, resistance to oppression, maintenance of community. It would be easy to say that the pragmatic activity of creating the quilt gives rise to the pursuit of ideals just as it would be easy to say the pursuit of ideals requires pragmatic actions. But the circumstances are more complicated than one factor leading to the other. Instead, they are interconnected. So rather than finding ways for idealism and pragmatism to balance out, we have to understand how increasing one means increasing both. For example, for Dee/Wangero, the pragmatic concerns over the quilts, their exchange and sign-exchange value, are not lessened by an increase in their idealistic concerns over their artistic and social value. That is, the more that American society in general and African-American society in particular prize the quilts as works of art and emblems of empowerment, the more the quilts are worth in terms of money and status. On the other hand, for the mother and Maggie, their idealizations of the quilts as products of heritage do not diminish the desire to put them to everyday use but make the desire all the more real.

The story ends without any resolution between Dee/Wangero and her mother. Dee / Wangero brusquely leaves without the

quilts and without any understanding of her mother’s sense of heritage. And while the mother and Maggie retain the quilts, they remain bound by economic disparity and unenlightened about the way the Black Pride movement is giving voice and form to the very values they already hold. Consequently, both sides of the conflict remain impoverished both materially and spiritually. As gratifying as it is to know that Dee/Wangero will not exploit the family quilts for her selfish ends, it is just as disheartening to know that the quilts will likely be put to everyday use. Despite Dee/Wangero’s questionable motivations, she does recognize that the quilts are priceless heirlooms worthy of preservation and admiration. And despite the mother’s laudable desire to preserve the family’s history, she does not seem to realize that taking measures to preserve the quilts would help to do just that. Or perhaps there is a better course of action that the mother and Dee/Wangero could work out together. But that is not going to happen. Because both characters fail to interrogate both their idealistic and pragmatic motives, and thereby fail to understand how they are intertwined, Dee/Wangero and her mother remain at cross-purposes even though their goals are related and could, conceivably, be merged.

The story closes with the understanding that the mother and Maggie will destroy the quilts to save them. No, that consequence is nowhere near as devastating as what happened at Ben Tre during the Vietnam War, but it should give us pause. The quilts will be lost in a conflict where the participants are not fully aware of their own motivations as well as the inevitable results of their goals because they do not consider how both their ideals and their pragmatic concerns are interconnected. But consider the potential ramifications for us all. Instead of forming our debates in terms of idealism versus pragmatism, if we would consider how our ideals and practicalities are interconnected, we could highlight our common interests and perhaps, even, begin the long process of moving toward consensus.

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