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Fight vs. Flight: A Re-evaluation of Dee in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

by Susan Farrell

Most readers of Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use," published in her 1973 collection, *In Love and Trouble*, agree that the point of the story is to show, as Nancy Tuten argues, a mother's "awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage" (Tuten 125).¹ These readers praise the "simplicity" of Maggie and her mother, along with their allegiance to their specific family identity and folk heritage as well as their refusal to change at the whim of an outside world that doesn't really have much to do with them. Such a reading condemns the older, more worldly sister, Dee, as "shallow," "condescending," and "manipulative," as overly concerned with style, fashion, and aesthetics, and thus as lacking a "true" understanding of her heritage. In this essay, conversely, I will argue that this popular view is far too simple a reading of the story. While Dee is certainly insensitive and selfish to a certain degree, she nevertheless offers a view of heritage and a strategy for contemporary African Americans to cope with an oppressive society that is, in some ways, more valid than that offered by Mama and Maggie.

We must remember from the beginning that the story is told by Mama; the perceptions are filtered through her mind and her views of her two daughters are not to be accepted uncritically. Several readers have pointed out that Mama's view of Maggie is not quite accurate—that Maggie is not as passive or as "hangdog" as she appears.² Might Mama's view of her older

¹See especially, along with Tuten's *Explicator* article, Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker's "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use,'" Margaret D. Bauer's "Alice Walker: Another Southern Writer Criticizing Codes Not Put to 'Everyday Use,'" and Donna Haisty Winchell's *Twayne Series* book on Alice Walker (80-84).

²Nancy Tuten, for instance, argues that the "action of the story . . . in no way supports Mama's reading of her younger daughter," that Maggie "conveys disgust with her sister rather than envy and awe" as Mama believes (127). Similarly, Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker point out that, "in her epiphanic moment of recognition," Mama must perceive "the fire-scarred Maggie—the stay-at-home victim of southern scarifications—in a revised light," that she must reassess "what she wrongly interprets as Maggie's hang-dog resignation before Dee" (717).

daughter, Dee, not be especially accurate as well? Dee obviously holds a central place in Mama's world. The story opens with the line: "I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon" (47). As Houston Baker points out, "The mood at the story's beginning is one of ritualistic waiting," of preparation "for the arrival of a goddess" (715). Thus, Dee seems to attain almost mythic stature in Mama's imagination as she and Maggie wait for the as-yet unnamed "her" to appear. Such an opening may lead readers to suspect that Mama has a rather troubled relationship with her older daughter. Dee inspires in Mama a type of awe and fear more suitable to the advent of a goddess than the love one might expect a mother to feel for a returning daughter.

Mama, in fact, displaces what seem to be her own fears onto Maggie when she speculates that Maggie will be cowed by Dee's arrival. Mama conjectures that

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eyeing her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that "no" is a word the world never learned to say to her. (47)

But Mama here emphasizes the perceptual nature of this observation—she says that Maggie *thinks* these things, encouraging readers to wonder whether or not this first perception of Dee is true. We also find out in the next section, when Mama relates her Johnny Carson television fantasy, that she herself is the one that will be "nervous" until after Dee goes, that she is ashamed of her own appearance and very much seeks her daughter's approval. Mama confesses that, in "real life," she is "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" (48). However, in her television fantasy, as Mama tells us,

all this does not show. . . . I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue. (48)

It is important to remember, though, that this Johnny Carson daydream is Mama's fantasy of a mother-child reunion, *not* Dee's. In fact, Mama even acknowledges that this particular scenario might not be to Dee's taste—she imagines Dee pinning an orchid on her even though Dee had previously told Mama she thinks orchids are "tacky flowers" (48). Thus, although Nancy Tuten equates Dee's values with those of "the white Johnny Carson society," it seems to me that we have to question whether Mama's vision of her light-

skinned, slender, witty self is actually Dee's wish or only Mama's perception of what she imagines Dee would like her to be.

Elsewhere, as well, we see that Mama is often wrong about her expectations of Dee and her readings of Dee's emotions. She writes that she "used to think" Dee hated Maggie as much as she hated the previous house that burned down (50). Mama implies, though, that she has since changed her mind about this. Further, as Mama and Maggie continue to wait for Dee's arrival, Mama "deliberately" turns her back on the house, expecting Dee to hate this house as much as Mama believes she hated the earlier one: "No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down" (51). When Dee does arrive, however, she has a camera with her and "never takes a shot without making sure the house is included" (53). Of course, most readers see this as evidence of Dee's fickle changing with whatever fad happens to be current. Once it becomes fashionable to have rural, poverty-stricken roots, Dee wants a record of her own humble beginnings. This might very well be true. Yet I would argue that we have only Mama's word for Dee's earlier haughtiness, and this could have been exaggerated, much as Mama hints that her earlier suspicion of Dee's hatred for Maggie was inaccurate. The more subtle point here is that Mama's expectations of Dee tell us more about Mama herself than they do about Dee. Again, Mama seems to view Dee with a mixture of awe, envy, and fear. Although she resents Dee because she expects Dee will want "to tear the house down," Mama still takes her cue from her older daughter, herself turning her back on the house, perhaps in an effort to appease this daughter, who looms so large in Mama's imagination.

In contrast to her own fearfulness, Mama, with grudging admiration, remembers Dee as a fearless girl. While Mama imagines herself unable to look white people in the eye, talking to them only "with one foot raised in flight," Dee "would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature" (49). Mama remembers Dee as self-centered and demanding, yes, but she also remembers this daughter as a determined fighter. Dee is concerned with style, but she'll do whatever is necessary to improve her circumstances. For instance, when Dee wants a new dress, she "makes over" an old green suit someone had given her mother. Rather than passively accept her lot, as Mama seems trained to do, Dee "was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts" (50). Mama's fearful nature is also apparent in her reaction to knowledge. Words for Mama are associated with "lies" and "other folks' habits" (50). She remembers feeling "trapped and ignorant" as Dee reads to her and Maggie "without pity" (50). This is partly because Mama never had an education herself. When her school was closed down in 1927, after she had completed only the second grade, Mama, like the other African Americans in her community, didn't fight: "colored asked fewer questions than they do now," she tells us (50). Again, Mama is trained in acquiescence while Dee refuses to meekly accept the status quo.

Most critics see Dee's education and her insistence on reading to Mama and Maggie as further evidence of her separation from and lack of understanding for her family identity and heritage. Tuten, for instance, argues that, in this story, "Walker stresses not only the importance of language but also the destructive effects of its misuse. . . . Rather than providing a medium for newfound awareness and for community . . . verbal skill equips Dee to oppress and manipulate others and to isolate herself" (125). Similarly, Donna Winchell writes that "Dee tries to force on" Maggie and her mother "knowledge they probably do not need." She continues,

Mrs. Johnson can take an objective look at who and what she is and find not disillusionment but an easy satisfaction. Simple pleasures—a dip of snuff, a cooling breeze across a clean swept yard, church songs, the soothing movements of milk cows—are enough. (82)

But are these "simple pleasures" really enough for Mama in the story? When she imagines her future she seems vaguely unhappy and apprehensive about it: "[Maggie] will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune" (50). Not quite sure what she will do with herself when Maggie marries, Mama can only imagine herself alone, engaging in an activity which she feels she is not even very good at. Although she perhaps goes about it in the wrong way—Mama says that Dee "pressed us to her with the serious way she read," only to "shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand" (50)—Dee at least tries to change what she foresees as Mama's fairly dismal future, a vision of her future Mama herself seems to reinforce rather than dispute. Thus, I'd suggest the possibility that Dee's attempt to educate Mama and Maggie may be read much more positively than other critics have suggested. Again, we must remember that Mama's perspective is the only one we see throughout the story. Told from Dee's point of view, we might expect a very different rendering of this incident. Rather than simply abandon her mother and sister in their ignorance and poverty, in their acquiescence to an oppressive system, Dee tries her best to extend her own education to them, which is surely not such a bad thing.

When Dee does finally arrive, both Maggie and her mother react again with fear of the unknown, of something strange and different. But as Dee approaches, Mama notices that the brightly colored African dress that Dee wears "throw[s] back the light of the sun" (52). Mama feels her "whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out" (52). She also admires the way that the "dress is loose and flows," and, despite her initial reaction, even decides that she likes it as Dee moves closer to her. In her admiration of the dress, Mama illustrates Walker's point that everything new is not to be feared,

that change can be positive, not only negative. Maggie, however, remains fearful, even in the face of the friendliness of Dee's companion who grins and greets Mrs. Johnson and Maggie warmly: "Asalamalakim, my mother and sister!" (52). When he tries to hug Maggie, though, she falls back against a chair and trembles. And later, when he tries to teach Maggie a new handshake, her hand remains limp and she quickly withdraws it from his.

Shortly after this, Dee announces that she is no longer Dee but "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo." She has newly adopted an African name since, as she explains: "I couldn't bear it any longer being named after the people who oppress me" (53). Many readers point to Dee's proclamation of her new name as the turning point in the story, the point at which Dee pushes her mother too far. They point out that Dee is rejecting her family heritage and identity in this scene. Yet it seems to me that Dee and Mama are *both* right here. Mama's recounting of the family history of the name is surely accurate, but what the critics fail to point out is that Dee's assertion that the name comes from "the people who oppress" her is also accurate. While most readers see Mama and Maggie as having a "true" sense of heritage as opposed to Dee's false or shallow understanding of the past, both Mama and Dee are blind to particular aspects of heritage. Dee has much to learn about honoring her particular and individual family history, but Mama has much to learn about the history of African Americans in general, and about fighting oppression. Although each is stubborn, both Dee and Mama do make a concession to the other here. Dee tells Mama that she needn't use the new name if she doesn't want to, while Mama shows her willingness to learn and to use the name.

Mama's secret admiration for Dee's fighting spirit leaks out again when she explicitly connects the "beef-cattle peoples down the road" to Dee and her boyfriend, "Hakim-a-barber." We see that the neighbors down the road, like Dee's boyfriend, are most likely black Muslims: they also say "Asalamalakim" when they meet, and Hakim explains that he accepts "some of their doctrines," although farming is not his style. Like Dee, these neighbors are also fighters. When "white folks" poison some of their cattle, they "stayed up all night with rifles in their hands" (54). Tellingly, Mama, who can't look white people in the eye and who never asked questions when her school closed down, is intrigued by this younger generation's refusal to acquiesce. She "walked a mile and a half" down the road "just to see the sight" of blacks armed for resistance (54). Mixed with her resentment against her older daughter's worldliness and self-centered attitude, Mama also grudgingly respects and even envies the willingness to fight evinced both by Dee and the black Muslim neighbors.

Maggie's forbearance in the story contrasts with Dee's boldness. When Dee haughtily insists that Maggie would ruin Grandma's quilts by using them everyday, and that hanging the quilts would be the only way to preserve

them, Maggie, "like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her," meekly replies: "She can have them, Mama, . . . I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts" (58). Mama, though, does not react so meekly. She sees Maggie standing with her scarred hands hidden in her skirt and says: "When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout"(58). This powerful feeling causes Mama to do something she "never had done before": she "snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap" (58). Ironically, in acting against Dee's wishes here, Mama is truly behaving more like Dee, with her refusal to back down, her willingness to stand up for herself, than she is like the patient and long-suffering Maggie. So perhaps, along with the younger, changing generation coming of age in the early 1970s that she is associated with, Dee, despite her outward obnoxiousness, has taught Mama something about fighting back. Or perhaps Dee has inherited more of her stubbornness and self-determination from her Mama than previously suspected. But, in any case, it seems too easy and neat a reading to simply praise Mama and Maggie for understanding their heritage while dismissing Dee as shallow and self-serving, when Mama's final courageous act ties her more closely to this older daughter than to the younger one she is trying to protect.

Walker raised similar problems concerning the willingness to fight for a cause versus the desire to remain passive in her novel *Meridian*, published in 1976, three years after *In Love and Trouble*. In this novel, Walker's main character, Meridian Hill, is at first passive and dreamy. She drifts into an early marriage and pregnancy, since these things seem to be expected of her, but she doesn't truly find direction in her life until she becomes involved with the early Civil Rights movement. As a movement worker, though, Meridian is tempted toward becoming a martyr for her cause. When asked if she would "kill for the revolution," Meridian remains unable to answer. Although readers see the complexities of Meridian's ambivalence here, other activists call her a coward and a masochist for her lack of commitment. In her forbearance and initial willingness to sacrifice her own needs if necessary, Meridian shares much in common with Maggie of "Everyday Use." Meridian's college roommate, Anne-Marion Coles, on the other hand, is similar to Dee. Aggressive and determined to change her life, Anne-Marion, unlike Meridian, easily asserts her willingness to kill if necessary. But, also like Dee in the way she treats Mama and Maggie, Anne-Marion is self-centered and at times unthinkingly cruel to the weaker, more fragile Meridian. While Meridian is certainly a more sympathetic character than Anne-Marion throughout the novel, just as Maggie and Mama are more appealing than Dee in many ways, by the end Walker shows us that Meridian has something

to learn from Anne-Marion and her other militant colleagues in the movement.

After the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the spring of 1968, Meridian begins to attend church again, an institution she had earlier abandoned, largely due to her mother's brand of hypocritical and tyrannical Christianity, which Meridian can't accept. But while in church this time, Meridian notices that things have changed since she was a child. This new church is not shabby, small, or humble like the churches of her childhood. Rather, it is "an imposing structure; and yet it did not reach for the sky, as cathedrals did, but settled firmly on the ground" (193). Just like its physical structure, this church's brand of religion is not small or humble either. To Meridian's surprise, this church's doctrine is firmly grounded in the politics and activism of the 1960s. The speaker for the day, in fact, is a red-eyed man, the father of a "slain martyr in the Civil Rights struggle." Further, when Meridian looks at the stained-glass window in this church, she notices that, instead of "the traditional pale Christ," there is an image of a "tall broad-shouldered black man," carrying a guitar in one hand and a dripping sword in the other. Suggesting the spirituality that Meridian has always associated with African American church music, the guitar is nevertheless combined with an image of militant activism. Recognizing this, Meridian comes to a moment of epiphany. Walker writes:

there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably *not* her own. (200)

Meridian then makes a promise to herself and to the red-eyed man whose son had been killed: "that yes, indeed she *would* kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again" (200). At approximately the same historical moment that the Civil Rights Movement was changing tactics, switching from King's brand of passive resistance to more violent, aggressive methods, Meridian finally learns the real value of fighting back, of refusing to passively play the role of a self-sacrificing martyr.

Interestingly, the moments of epiphany experienced by both Mama and Meridian are associated with the institution of the black church. While Meridian sees that the church can, in fact, be a revolutionary force, Mama likens the feeling she gets when she defies Dee to being touched by the spirit of God in church. In both works, Walker imagines a Christianity that is neither passive nor forbearing, but rather one that supplies African Americans with the spirituality necessary to support their defiance of oppression. Readers of these two works may at first be seduced into

affirming the passive acquiescence of characters such as Mama, Maggie and Meridian because they are, in many ways, more palatable, more likeable, than such aggressive fighters as Dee and Anne-Marion. These determined, fierce women, however, have much to teach the more forbearing, self-sacrificing characters in both works. Yet, at the same time, we see that a spirit of rebellion, without a corresponding spirituality and respect for such traditional black institutions as the church or the folk arts of "Everyday Use" can be empty as well. Though defiant and aggressive, both Dee and Anne-Marion are selfish and capricious in their social activism. Finally, then, in "Everyday Use," Walker shows that Mama's moment of triumph is achieved because she is able to attain a balance between the two types of her heritage represented by her very different daughters—at the end Mama combines Maggie's respect for tradition with Dee's pride and refusal to back down, the combination Walker seems to feel is necessary if true social change is to come about.

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