Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a narrative of a rural African American family struggling to understand their heritage. The Johnson family epitomizes the conflicts and struggles of African American culture and values. The story involves Dee, an educated girl who goes to visit her mother, Mrs. Johnson, and sister, Maggie. Dee is accompanied by Hakim, her boyfriend. The aim of this paper is to discuss Walker's uses of character conflict and symbols to illustrate the importance of heritage.

Walker uses symbolism to show Mrs. Johnson and Dee's different views of heritage. Even though both are from the same socio-cultural background, their motives and understanding of heritage are different. In one scenario, Dee admires a churn top and asks her mother if she can have it. She says, "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table…and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher." (p.31). It is clear that Dee cherishes the tool and identifies it as part of her heritage, but her plan to use it as a centerpiece for her alcove table is contrary to Mrs. Johnson's views, who uses it as a tool to churn butter. The churn top is a symbol of Mrs. Johnson's and Dee' differing perceptions of heritage.

Walker's use of symbolism is evident when Dee goes through her mother's truck and emerges with two quilts. These quilts are made of different parchments worn by their relatives since the Civil War. Dee borrows the quilts, but Mrs. Johnson reveals to her of her promise to leave them to Maggie and instead offers her others. Dee is incensed and says, "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts…She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use." (p.130). Dee tells Mrs. Johnson that she plans on hanging the quilts on the wall. This shows that Dee's perception of heritage is that it is artistic and tangible. Maggie tells Mrs. Johnson to give Dee the quilts stating that she can "remember Grandma Dee without the quilts" (p.131). It
becomes apparent to Mrs. Johnson that Maggie truly values their heritage, and her knowledge of knowing how to quilt affirms that she understands that heritage is made up of knowledge and memories, not tangible objects.

Finally, Walker uses character conflict to show the differences how Mrs. Johnson and Maggie understand heritage, and how Dee perceives it. Mrs. Johnson is described as "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" (p.11). She is a hard working woman and proud of her efforts in the homestead. Similarly, Maggie works hard, having learned how to quilt from Grandma Dee's teaching. Mrs. Johnson remarks that Maggie's eyes "seem stretched open, blazed open by the flames" (p. 25) in reference to the burns that affected her early in her childhood. Mrs. Johnson understands that Maggie's heritage is connected with the burning house, and her scars are part it. It is evident that both Mrs. Johnson and Maggie are self-sufficient and are in touch with their traditions. Dee, on the other hand, is out of touch with her heritage completely. She changes her name in her attempt to identify with her African origins, which she knows nothing about. Furthermore, the fact that Dee just looked at the house as it burned to the ground is an indication that she does not identify the house as part of her heritage.

In conclusion, Walker uses character conflict and symbolism to show the importance of heritage in "Everyday Use." Mrs. Johnson and Maggie's illustrations as down to earth, hardworking people, reveals that they identify with their heritage and where they come from, unlike Dee's attempt to change her appearance and name. Additionally, Dee's efforts to turn valuable house tools and items to artifacts make it clear that her understanding of heritage is different from her mother and sister's understanding. Walker employs literal devices to show how heritage can be viewed and perceived so differently.

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