Before You Read

Everyday Use

Make the Connection

Generation Clashes

To parents the new generation's choices often seem strange or wrong. To children the older generation often seems stuck in the past.

"Everyday Use" takes place in the rural South during the 1960s, when values and ways of life were changing rapidly. In this story, an African American mother is living an old-fashioned farm life with one of her daughters. When her other daughter visits, with new values and a new boyfriend, the mother must make a choice.

Quickwrite

Many families have traditions or heirlooms that are handed down to the younger generation. Do you have any in your family? Jot down your feelings about maintaining traditions and continuity in a family.

Elements of Literature

Conflict: Blocked Desires

It is the **conflict** in a story that stirs our emotions. If the conflict hooks our interest, it creates suspense and makes us want to read on.

Conflict often occurs when a character's desires are blocked in some way. Conflicts that stir our emotions can be big and dramatic, or they can be as quiet as the question of what to do with an old quilt.

> **Conflict** is a struggle that usually occurs when the main character's desires are blocked in some way.
>
> *For more on Conflict, see pages 32–33 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.*

Reading Skills and Strategies

Comparing and Contrasting Characters

Maggie and Dee are the two adult sisters in this story. Much of the conflict in the story arises because the sisters are separated by wide differences in appearance, education, values, and personalities. As you read, **compare and contrast** the sisters. Track any shifting feelings and sympathies you may have for one sister or the other.

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LEO 10-1

She thinks her sister had held life always in the palm of one hand, that "no" is a word the world never learned to say to her.

You've no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has "made it" is confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other's faces. Sometimes the mother and father weep; the child wraps them in her arms and leans across the table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have seen these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage, and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she had told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. 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 open 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 sledgehammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. 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.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.

"How do I look, Mama?" Maggie says, showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she's there, almost hidden by the door.

"Come out into the yard," I say.

Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground.

Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure. She's a woman now, though sometimes I forget. How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them. And Dee. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of, a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much.

I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to

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WORDS TO OWN

sidle (sīd′'l) *v.:* move sideways, especially in a shy or sneaky manner.

---

of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it. I hear Maggie go "Uhnnnh" again. It is her sister's hair. It stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears.

"Wa-su-zo-Tean-o!" she says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move. The short, stocky fellow with the hair to his navel is all grinning, and he follows up with "Asalamalakim,[1] my mother and sister!" He moves to hug Maggie but she falls back, right up against the back of my chair. I feel her trembling there, and when I look up I see the perspiration falling off her chin.

"Don't get up," says Dee. Since I am stout, it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around in the edge of the yard, she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Meanwhile, Asalamalakim is going through motions with Maggie's hand. Maggie's hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he don't know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie.

"Well," I say. "Dee."

"No, Mama," she says. "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"

"What happened to 'Dee'?" I wanted to know.

"She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me."

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was *she* named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee," I said.

"And who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"Her mother," I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. "That's about as far back as I can trace it," I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

"Well," said Asalamalakim, "there you are."

"Uhnnnh," I heard Maggie say.

"There I was not," I said, "before 'Dicie' cropped up in our family, so why should I try to trace it that far back?"

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.

"How do you pronounce this name?" I asked.

"You don't have to call me by it if you don't want to," said Wangero.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "If that's what you want us to call you, we'll call you."

"I know it might sound awkward at first," said Wangero.

"I'll get used to it," I said. "Ream it out again."

Well, soon we got the name out of the way. Asalamalakim had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three times, he told me to just call him Hakim-a-barber. I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn't really think he was, so I didn't ask.

1. **Asalamalakim:** Asalaam aleikum (ä·sə·läm′ ä·lā′koom′), greeting used by Muslims meaning "peace to you."

Words to Own

cowering (kou′ər·iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.:* drawing back or huddling in fear.

They are stitched around the borders by machine."

"That'll make them last better," I said.

"That's not the point," said Wangero. "These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine!" She held the quilts securely in her arms, stroking them.

"Some of the pieces, like those lavender ones, come from old clothes her mother handed down to her," I said, moving up to touch the quilts. Dee (Wangero) moved back just enough so that I couldn't reach the quilts. They already belonged to her.

"Imagine!" she breathed again, clutching them closely to her bosom.

"The truth is," I said, "I promised to give them quilts to Maggie, for when she marries John Thomas."

She gasped like a bee had stung her.

"Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

"I reckon she would," I said. "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!" I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told me they were old-fashioned, out of style.

"But they're *priceless*!" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper. "Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is *these* quilts, these quilts!"

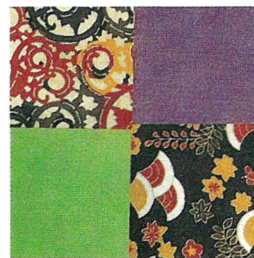
"Well," I said, stumped. "What would *you* do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff, and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear, but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.



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. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands, and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open.

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee.

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim-a-barber.

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said. And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live, you'd never know it."

She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin.

Maggie smiled, maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle, I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.

Connections | A News Feature

In Georgia's Swept Yards, a Dying Tradition

ANNE RAVER

ATHENS, Ga.—Mismatched pots of begonias and petunias hang from old porches that could use some work. Painted chicken feeders blossom with zinnias and red salvia. These yards have no grass—because they are swept clean with a broom made of dogwood branches gathered in the woods.

They don't look like much at first glance. But hidden in their unconscious design are traces of West Africa and the emergence of a hard-won independence.

Blacks here, descendants of slaves brought, mainly from West Africa, to work the cotton fields in Georgia's hard clay, are carrying on the traditions that their ancestors brought from the Gold Coast°—everything from cooking and washing outdoors to sharing the latest gossip under a shade tree. But these yards and the life they hold are fast disappearing, as the people who have long tended them grow old and their children move on.

The swept yard was the most important "room" of the household, the heart of the home. Slave quarters were cramped and hot. So you washed and cooked outside, and when the meal was over, everything could be swept into the fire.

Sixteen years ago, when Richard Westmacott, an Englishman, came to Athens to teach landscape architecture at the University of Georgia, he and his wife, Jean, moved into an abandoned pre–Civil War house in rural Oglethorpe County, about twenty miles east of town. In visiting the gardens of his neighbors, he realized that what the local people took for granted was the embodiment of a fast-disappearing culture.

"I have no doubt that the swept yard did come from Africa—and then was adopted by white folks," said Mr. Westmacott, whose book, *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South,* was published last year by the University of Tennessee. "Almost everybody had swept yards, including the plantations, which were swept by slaves or servants."

Mr. Westmacott's book, which examines the traditions and folk art of these black gardeners, is the result of his travels through rural Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. His photographs capture a society that is fast disappearing, as children move to the cities for work and buy their vegetables at the supermarket. His book also includes photographs of villages in West Africa, taken at the turn of the century and preserved in British archives, that show striking similarities to the swept yards of the South.

Swept yards are so familiar to some that they have become invisible.

When Mr. Westmacott asked why they swept their yards, gardeners simply said that their mothers and grandmothers did it that way.

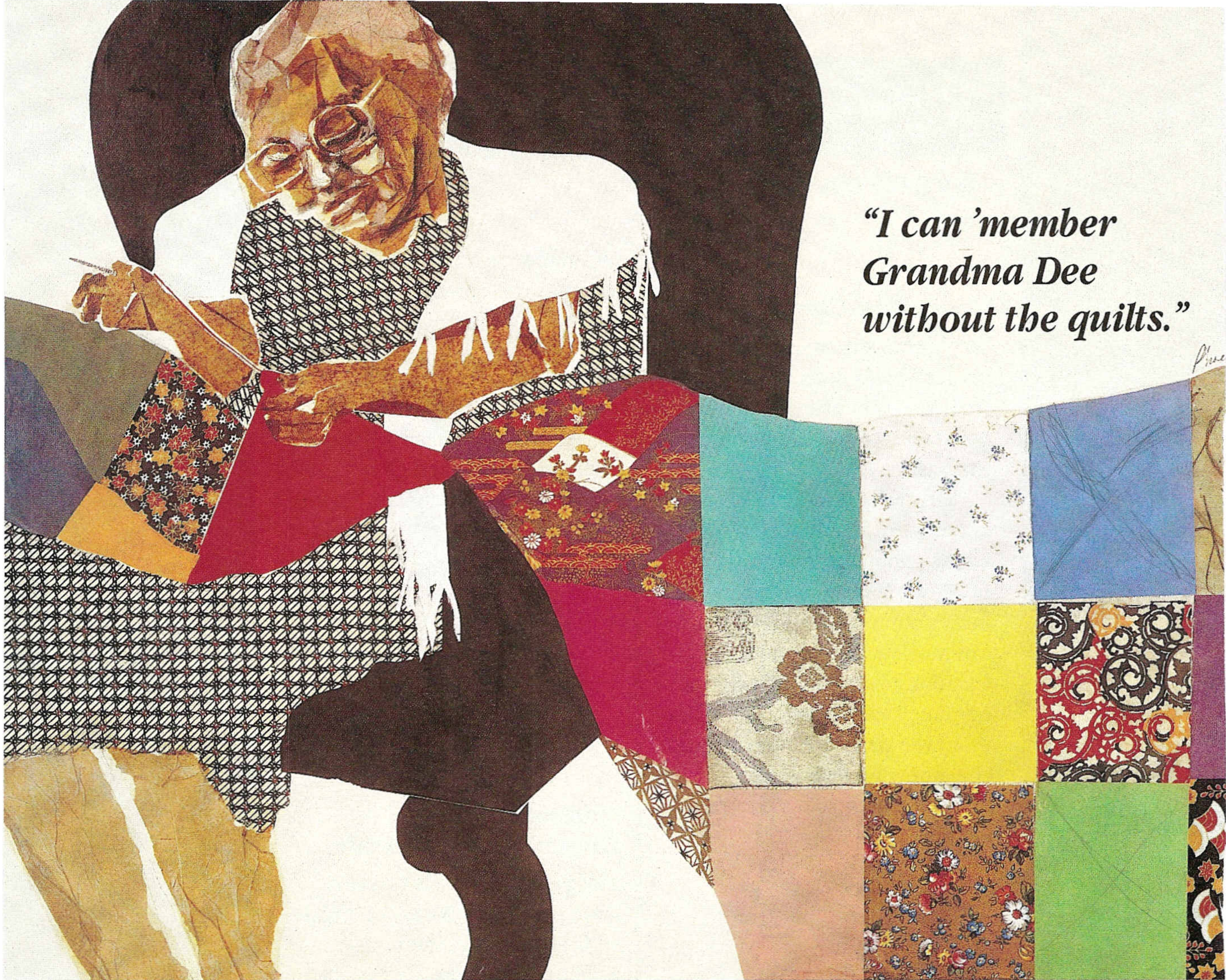
"It comes from way back," said Dell Appling, sitting on an old glider under some oak trees brought from the woods and "set out" years ago. "My mother—she was ninety when she passed—would sweep the yard with a brush broom we made out of dogwood."

—from *The New York Times,* August 8, 1993

° *The Gold Coast is a former British colony in western Africa, now an independent country called Ghana.*

Photo by Richard Westmacott.

Yard-sweeping near Lodge, South Carolina.



His Grandmother's Quilt (1988) by Phoebe Beasley (1943–). Collage.

Courtesy of the artist.

Everyday Use

For Your Grandmama

Alice Walker

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

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.

school. She used to read to us without pity, forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious ways she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was.

I never had an education myself. After second grade the school closed down. Don't ask me why: In 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now. Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly but can't see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by. She 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. I was always better at a man's job. I used to love to milk till I was hooked in the side in '49. Cows are soothing and slow and don't bother you, unless you try to milk them the wrong way.

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs anymore. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we "choose" to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends. Maggie and I thought about this and Maggie asked me, "Mama, when did Dee ever *have* any friends?"

She had a few. Furtive boys in pink shirts hanging about on washday after school. Nervous girls who never laughed. Impressed with her, they worshiped the well-turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye. She read to them.

When she was courting Jimmy T, she didn't have much time to pay to us but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He *flew* to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant, flashy people. She hardly had time to recompose herself.

When she comes, I will meet—but there they are!

Maggie attempts to make a dash for the house, in her shuffling way, but I stay her with my hand. "Come back here," I say. And she stops and tries to dig a well in the sand with her toe.

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat looking, as if God himself shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail. I hear Maggie suck in her breath. "Uhnnnh" is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. "Uhnnnh."

Dee next. A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds

Words to Own

furtive (fur'tiv) *adj.:* acting as if trying not to be seen. *Furtive* also means "done secretly."

"You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road," I said. They said "Asalamalakim" when they met you, too, but they didn't shake hands. Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt-lick shelters, throwing down hay. When the 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.

Hakim-a-barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style." (They didn't tell me, and I didn't ask, whether Wangero—Dee—had really gone and married him.)

We sat down to eat and right away he said he didn't eat collards, and pork was unclean. Wangero, though, went on through the chitlins and corn bread, the greens, and everything else. She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. 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.

"Oh, Mama!" she cried. Then turned to Hakim-a-barber. "I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump prints," she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh, and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish. "That's it!" she said. "I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have." She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber[2] by now. She looked at the churn and looked at it.

"This churn top is what I need," she said. "Didn't Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have?"

"Yes," I said.

"Uh huh," she said happily. "And I want the dasher,[3] too."

"Uncle Buddy whittle that, too?" asked the barber.

Dee (Wangero) looked up at me.

"Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash," said Maggie so low you almost couldn't hear her. "His name was Henry, but they called him Stash."

"Maggie's brain is like an elephant's," Wangero said, laughing. "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table," she said, sliding a plate over the churn, "and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher."

When she finished wrapping the dasher, the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light-yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived.

After dinner Dee (Wangero) went to the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it. Maggie hung back in the kitchen over the dishpan. Out came Wangero with two quilts. They had been pieced by Grandma Dee, and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. 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.

"Mama," Wangero said sweet as a bird. "Can I have these old quilts?"

I heard something fall in the kitchen, and a minute later the kitchen door slammed.

"Why don't you take one or two of the others?" I asked. "These old things was just done by me and Big Dee from some tops your grandma pieced before she died."

"No," said Wangero. "I don't want those.

2. **clabber:** thickly curdled sour milk.
3. **dasher:** pole that stirs the milk in a churn.

Words to Own

doctrines (däk′trinz) *n.:* principles; teachings; beliefs.
rifling (rī′fliŋ) *v.* used as *n.:* searching thoroughly or in a rough manner.

Alice Walker and her daughter, Rebecca.

MEET THE WRITER

Out of Eatonton

Alice Walker (1944–), shown above with her daughter, Rebecca, was born in the small town of Eatonton, Georgia, the youngest of eight children. Her father was a sharecropper, and her mother worked as a maid. When she was eight years old, Walker was blinded in one eye by a shot from a BB gun. The resulting scar tissue made her painfully shy and self-conscious, and she spent her free time alone outdoors, reading and writing stories. With the aid of a scholarship for handicapped students, she attended Spelman College, a college for African American women in Atlanta.

Women have always played an important role in Walker's life. She has said that she grew up believing there was absolutely nothing her mother couldn't do once she set her mind to it. So when the women's movement came along, she said that she was delighted because she felt they were trying to go where her mother was and where she had always assumed she would go.

Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple,* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 and was made into a popular movie. Walker has been a contributing editor of *Ms.* magazine and has been active in both the women's movement and the civil rights movement.

Walker has published short stories, poems, essays, and novels, so it comes as a surprise to learn that she never intended to be a writer.

" I just kind of found myself doing it. I remember wanting to be a scientist, wanting to be a pianist, wanting to be a painter. But all the while I was wanting to be these other things, I was writing. We were really poor, and writing was about the cheapest thing to do. You know, I feel amazed that I have been able to do exactly what I wanted to do. "

MAKING MEANINGS

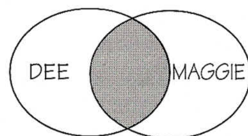
First Thoughts

1. Which character did you side with in the conflict over the quilts, and why?

Shaping Interpretations

2. What do you think is the source of the **conflict** in this story? Consider:
   - Which **character** sets the action in motion?
   - Which of her desires are blocked?
   - Who or what is blocking them?
   - Is the battle **external** or **internal** or both?
3. Dee is referred to as the child who has "made it." What do you think that means, and what signs tell you that she has "made it"?

4. Use a diagram like the one on the right to **compare and contrast** Dee and Maggie. What is the most significant thing they have in common? What is their most compelling difference?



5. Near the end of the story, Dee accuses Mama of not understanding their African American heritage. Do you agree or disagree with Dee, and why?
6. Has any character changed by the end of the story? Go back to the text and find details to support your answer.
7. Why do you think Alice Walker dedicated her story "For Your Grandmama"?

Extending the Text

8. What do you think each of these three women will be doing ten years after the story ends?
9. This story takes place in a very particular **setting** and a very particular **culture.** Talk about whether or not the problems faced by this family could be experienced by any family, anywhere.

Challenging the Text

10. Do you think Alice Walker chose the right narrator for her story? How would the story differ if Dee or Maggie were telling it, instead of Mama? (What would we know that we don't know now?)

Reading Check

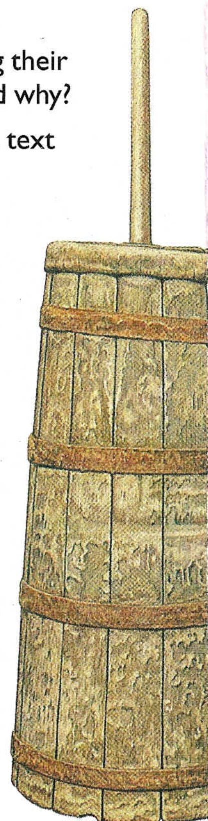
a. According to Mama, how is Dee different from her and from Maggie?

b. How would Maggie and Dee use the quilts differently?

c. When she was a child, something terrible happened to Maggie. What was it?

d. How did the mother choose to resolve the **conflict** over the quilts?

e. Find the passage in the text that explains the **title**.



Churn (1935–1942), rendering by Lelah Nelson. Watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite on paperboard ($18\frac{1}{16}'' \times 11\frac{3}{4}''$).

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