

Interview with Alice Walker Roland L. Freeman

I asked Alice to talk first about the tradition of quilting in her family.

Well, my mother was a quilter, and I remember many, many afternoons of my mother and the neighborhood women sitting on the porch around the quilting frame, quilting and talking, you know; getting up to stir something on the stove and coming back and sitting down.

The first quilt I worked on was the *In Love and Trouble* quilt. And I did that one when I was living in Mississippi. It was during a period when we were wearing African-inspired dresses. So all of the pieces are from dresses that I actually wore. This yellow and black fabric I bought when I was in Uganda, and I had a beautiful dress made of it that I wore and wore and wore and eventually I couldn't wear it anymore; partly I had worn it out and also I was pregnant, so it didn't fit, and I used that and I used the red and white and black, which was a long, floor-length dress that I had when I was pregnant with my daughter, Rebecca, who is now twenty-three. I took these things apart or I used scraps. I put them together in this quilt, because it just seemed perfect. Mississippi was full of political and social struggle, and regular quilts were all African American with emphasis on being here in the United States. But because of the African consciousness that was being raised and the way that we were all wearing our hair in naturals and wearing all of these African dresses, I felt the need to blend these two traditions. So it's a quilt of great memory and importance to me. I use it a lot and that's why it's so worn.

I asked her what happens when she sleeps under that quilt.

Oh... I am warm and I am secure and I am safe. I feel that I know how to create my own environment, and I know how to protect it. And I know how to choose it. I realize that my quilts are really simple, and yet, they give me so much pleasure, because even in their extreme simplicity they are just as useful as the most complex. And in their own way, they are beautiful because they do express what I was feeling and they clearly mark a particular time for me.

I asked her if she had made a quilt for her daughter.

No. I'm sure that she will make her own quilt. I'll be happy to leave her these if they are not worn out, which they will probably be, but I hope that she will make quilts for her own grounding and her own connection to me and to her grandmother and to her great-grandmother. I've seen quilts that my grandmother made. They tended to be very serviceable, very heavy and really for warmth, and well of course, beautiful. My daughter has a quilt that she travels with. It's just a beautiful simple quilt that she loves. I gave it to her because she just feels like you can't sleep under just any old thing. It's got to be something that is congenial with your dream—time. I'm trying to think of where I got it. I think that I just bought it somewhere. I believe it is from Texas.

I asked Alice what she'd like to say to people in general about quilting.

That they should learn to do it. That they should think less about collecting quilts and give more thought to making them. Because, really, that is the power. It may do all kinds of good things, too, to collect what others have made, but I think that it is essential that we know how to express, you know, our own sense of connection. And there is no better sense of understanding our own creation than to create, and so we should do that.

“Everyday Use” Study Guide

I. Pre-reading Questions:

1. The main character of this story struggles with her family relationships. Have you ever had difficulty with family members? Describe this situation.
2. Have you ever wanted to be accepted for who you are? What would you like people to know about you that sometimes causes you shame?
3. Can you think of a time when you received something special, but that you truly deserved? Describe the situation
4. Have you ever thought about your life and the special belongings you own? What items do you consider important and would enjoy passing down through the generations?

II. Study Questions:

1. What is the significance of the title in relation to the central conflict of the story?
2. Describe Maggie's personality and her feelings toward her sister Dee. How does she deal with Dee's demand for the quilts, and why? Are there any ways in which Maggie is “better off” than Dee?
3. Discuss some of the positive *and* negative aspects of Dee's character, focusing in particular on her relationship with her family. What is implied about Dee in the passage describing the loss of their previous home?
4. Is there anything ironic about Dee's accusations that her mother and sister do not understand their heritage? What are the personal consequences of her efforts to stake her claim to a piece of that heritage?
5. Describe the narrator's personality and her feelings about her daughter Dee. In what sense is this “her” story?

Interview with Alice Walker Study Guide

I. Pre-reading Questions:

1. Have you ever created or participated in a family tradition? Describe this situation.
2. Have you ever been taught a skill or craft by an older relative or friend?
3. Can you think of a time when you received something special another person created? Describe the situation

II. Study Questions:

1. How can you tell which words are the interviewer's questions and which are Alice Walker's responses?
2. In the paragraph beginning with "*The first quilt I worked on was the In Love and Trouble...*" is Alice Walker providing facts or opinions? How might you verify them?
3. What would you state as the main idea about quilting that the speaker expresses in this statement? "*I hope that she will make quilts for her own grounding and her own connection to me and to her grandmother and to her great-grandmother.*"
4. Do you agree with Walker's opinion that there is power in making and creating? Explain.
5. What is the **tone** of this non-fiction piece?