Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use*: Overcoming Racist Stereotypes

*Everyday Use* shows that valuing one’s own sense of self and individuality proves to be more fulfilling than society’s expectations. This is demonstrated in the final scenes of the story when Maggie no longer compares herself to her sister and learns to appreciate the traditions and culture she was raised in. Patricia Hill Collins makes the argument that skin color privileges people who are white; however, *Everyday Use* makes the argument that although Dee is of African American ethnicity, it is her willingness to conform and hide who she really is that allows her to become an active member of society. Although *Everyday Use* paints Dee to look like she abandoned her culture and is very unlikeable, Dee fights the stereotype of her race and becomes the *femme fatale* of the story by becoming an active member of society.

In order to become a recognized member of society Dee is forced to conceal her cultural identity so she can leave it all behind her and make something of her life. Patricia Hill Collins makes the argument that skin color privileges certain individuals in her article “Toward A New Vision.” However, in Dee’s case this argument should be revised to say that an African American woman can achieve whatever she would like as long as she conforms to society’s wishes and hides her culture. White patriarchal society oppresses African American men and women by encouraging them to conform and disregard their cultural traditions which explains why Dee becomes obsessed with acquiring her family artifacts and antiques so she is able to display her culture in a way that will not hold her back from thriving in a society that stereotypes...
her entire race as “irresponsible, wallowing in welfare, food stamps, and free housing” (Woman’s Voices and Feminist Visions). Joe Sarnowski’s article explains that by changing her name she has eliminated one of the last pieces of her cultural identity that displays her intentional disconnection with her culture to make way for her new identity. *Feminism is for Everybody* explains that bell hooks believes poverty to be a central woman’s issue because “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal attempts to dismantle the welfare system in our society will deprive poor and indigent women of access to even the most basic necessities of life: shelter and food” (hooks 51). Alice Walker gives no indication or mention of Dee and Maggie’s father; however she does make it clear that their mother provides for them and does a fair amount of hard manual labor: “In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man” (Walker 337). Dee’s mother even took it upon herself to ensure that her oldest daughter got the best education without the help of a husband. Maggie and her mother are very masculine and independent women who desire no man to care for them thus the white patriarchal society has no place for them; because her mother and sister fail to understand that to overcome racist stereotypes one must sacrifice who they are. Dee begins to see her family as irresponsible and uncivilized which creates distance between them and tends to make Dee’s character to be less liked by audiences.

The white patriarchal society disregards African Americans and women of any race which makes it even harder for Dee to break away from the stereotypes of the culture she was born into. Dee is an African American woman born into an almost typical family comprised of a mother and sister but strangely enough no father figure is mentioned. In her text *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Bell Hooks explains the foundations of patriarchy and how it becomes integrated into society. She claims that “blind obedience is the foundation upon
which patriarchy stands” because most of us assume these attitudes and behaviors through the families we were born into while also being enforced by our school and religious systems in addition to our mothers. Bell Hooks further explains that blind obedience “is the repression of all emotions except fear; the destruction of individual willpower; and the repression of thinking whenever it departs from the authority figure’s way of thinking” (hooks 23). In his article “Antagonized By The Text, Or, It Takes Two To Read Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” Matthew Mullins explores Dee’s character and how she comes off to be very unlikable and grapples with how audiences should feel about her character who breaks away from traditional African American values to pursue her own identity. According to Mullins, Dee is becoming more of a spectator than a member of her culture which creates distance between her and her family, making readers feel wary about the way she begins to objectify her family and their way of life that she no longer claims to be a part of. This becomes evident when Dee comes looking for souvenirs from her upbringing to decorate her house in her “new” life and when she is denied what she wants she accuses her mother of being incapable of “understanding her heritage” (Walker 343). It is this manner that makes her unlikable, yet, this experience is turning her into a strong, independent, and goal oriented black woman. Dee is blazing a trail, not just for herself, but for women of all ages with high hopes and ambitions that extend beyond society’s prescribed racist stereotypes. Dee aims to make something of herself in a society that expects black women to conform and she wishes this same ambition upon her sister Maggie “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” (Walker 343). It is unfortunate that the text does not highlight Dee’s ambition instead of her disregard of her heritage.
Although Dee is forced to go in a separate direction from her culture and her family, she does so with the intention of making a better life for herself beyond what society expects of an African American woman. Dee’s efforts will pave the way for many women after her to have the option to fit into white patriarchal society if that is what they want. Dee claimed that she changed her name because she was “named after the people who oppress her” (Walker 340) when in fact it is the influence of both patriarchal and racist society that causes oppression in Dee and people in a similar position. Dee’s independence and drive at first make her out to be the villain of *Everyday Use* when she is the *femme fatal* of the story who moves against the grain of white supremacy and gender inequality to make a future for herself and African American women to follow her.

This is a very interesting and very well written essay so far. You are definately heading in the right direction. Make sure to explain what your quotes are talking about and how they connect to your paragraph claim & your overall thesis. I really like your use of sources. They really add a lot to your essay, but you have to make sure to fully explain them. This essay was very interesting & made me actually want to read the story that you were talking about. Keep up the good work!

**Works Cited**


