
Introduction

What the Story Is About

In this story you will find yourself in the rural South once again—as you did in “A Worn Path”—but this time the civil rights and black heritage movements are gathering strength, sometime in the middle 1960s. “Everyday Use” is a story of two sisters and their mother.

Sister Dee is a beautiful, sophisticated college graduate who lives a modern and successful life. Mama, who has made Dee’s success possible, has stayed behind in the country with a younger daughter Maggie, who is a painfully shy, ungainly girl.

Maggie and Mama are living in the old, country way when they are favored by a whirlwind visit by Dee. She has had her consciousness raised about her African heritage and now calls herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. She is wearing an African dress and has brought a friend, a short, stocky man with long hair whose name is three times as long as Wangero’s, and unpronounceable as far as Maggie and Mama are concerned.

Dee (Wangero) had hated everything about her rural upbringing, but now she wants to take some of her mother’s country antiques because, she says, her mother and Maggie don’t understand their heritage the way she does. Who really understands and appreciates their heritage—and other important moral values—and who does not, is the intriguing question that is left for you to decide.

Alice Walker was born in 1944 to sharecropping parents in Eatonton, Georgia, the same place where the mythical plantation Tara of *Gone with the Wind* was located. Walker became nationally famous when her novel *The Color Purple* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for literature (1983) and was later made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg. Walker was writing long before that, however, and had five books to her credit before she was thirty. She is now in great demand as a scholar-lecturer at colleges and writing seminars around the country and around the world. While *The Color Purple* is her most famous book, you will also want to look for other examples of her work in your library. *Meridian* is a novel that centers on events of the civil rights movement. *In Love and Trouble* is a collection of short stories dealing with problems and conflicts faced by black, American women. *Good Night Willie Lee, I’ll See You In the Morning* is a collection of poems.

Here is a list of terms that you may not be familiar with:

collards. collard greens; a leafy vegetable

chitlins. chitterlings; a meat dish made from the intestines of pigs

churn. butter churn for turning milk into butter

dasher. the handle of a butter churn

clabber. soured milk

quilting frame. a large frame where a quilt is hung while the quilters stitch the top of the quilt to its backing and inner layer of cotton batting (Quilt making is intricate, artful, and laborious work. The quilts described in the story would probably be worth thousands of dollars as antiques.)

checkerberry snuff. snuff flavored with wintergreen berries (One way to use this form of tobacco is to hold it in the cheek or lower lip.)

Asalamalakim. a ceremonial Moslem (Islamic) greeting meaning, roughly, “peace be with you” (Many Africans who came to the United States as slaves were Moslems, which is one reason that some black Americans in search of their African roots have turned to the religion of Islam.)

What the Lesson Is About

You read in the lesson on point of view that one of the ways an author’s presence is felt in a story is through the characters—how the characters are presented, and what the author has them say and do. Character development will be discussed in more detail in the lesson that follows “Everyday Use.”

People, animals, and other creatures (robots, talking trees, ghosts, monsters, and space aliens, for example) all find their way into stories as “characters.” *Characterization* describes the creation of these imaginary people and things in a way that makes them seem real within the context of their story. The ability to create real characters successfully is the most important skill of a storyteller. A story, after all, is about a character or a group of characters who act out their lives in the face of problems that the author has created for them.

The following questions will help you see how Alice Walker creates the characters in “Everyday Use.” Keep these questions in mind and try to answer them as you read:

1. What do you learn about the characters, and how do you feel about them from the way the author describes them?
2. What do you learn about the characters, and how do you feel about them as a result of their actions and conversations?
3. How does the author influence your feelings about the characters?
4. What can you gain on a personal level from discussing the characters after you have read about them?

Everyday Use

by Alice Walker

J 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. 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.

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 has 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 sledge hammer 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 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 way 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 was 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 any more. 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 had 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. "Uhnneh," is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. "Uhnneh."

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, too, gold and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds 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 "Uhnneh" 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, 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 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 the 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.”

“Uhhnnh,” 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.

“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 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, 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. 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 checker-berry 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.

Character

Some literary characters are so memorable that they are virtually historical figures, part of our heritage. The very mention of their names evokes pictures in your mind. Start by recalling some of the very first storybook characters you ever knew: Humpty Dumpty, the Three Little Pigs, the Grasshopper and the Ant. Those names not only create vivid pictures in your mind but also remind you of human strengths and failings. Humpty Dumpty suggests an irretrievable collapse or breakdown; the Three Little Pigs represent carelessness versus careful planning; and the Grasshopper and the Ant are associated with industry and frivolity.

Later in your reading you met such characters as Tom Sawyer, everyone's image of an American boy; Charlotte, the heroic spider of *Charlotte's Web*; and Superman, the epitome of physical power. Many characters in fiction have seized your imagination so strongly that they seem to have a life outside of the story in which they appear. Characters in novels by Charles Dickens—David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Sydney Carton, Mr. Pickwick—have come alive again in dozens of plays and motion pictures. Those characters have been commemorated in prints, paintings, and fine china sculptures. An interesting sidelight to history occurred when Dickens was writing his novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The story first appeared in monthly installments in an English magazine. At one point a character in the story, Little Nell, lay dying. She had become so real to readers in the United States that huge crowds formed on the docks waiting for the ship that would bring the next episode of the story. Was poor Nell still alive? When the author allowed Nell to die, a storm of protest followed him for allowing the tragedy to happen.

Spellbound readers still write letters to Sherlock Holmes almost a hundred years after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had him solve crimes in Victorian England. Every year thousands of tourists visit a replica of 221B Baker Street, the imagined London residence of Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson. The character, in fact, has surpassed the fame of his author since most people refer to "Sherlock Holmes stories" rather than stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. That response is the power of great characterization.

Characterization in the hands of an accomplished writer is like a paintbrush in the hands of a talented artist. By adding a line here and there, an artist can make a person look beautiful or ugly; a subtle shading around the eyes can make a person appear mean or kind, sad or cheerful. In the same way, with a word or two describing a look or an action, an author can make you like or dislike a character. Depending on how an author draws a character, you may sympathize with one and wish the worst for another.

As you will learn in this lesson, understanding the characters in a story is not

something you have to work at very hard. A good author creates characters who clearly identify and explain themselves. You will see how Alice Walker manages to develop strong characters by examining these aspects of characterization:

1. The characters are developed by the author's descriptions.
2. The characters are developed in the course of the story's action and dialogue.
3. The authors influence your feelings toward the characters.
4. You participate in analyzing and understanding story characters.



Creating Characters with Descriptions

If you are going to meet someone new, it is natural to want to know something about that person. Generally you want a physical description first—tall or short? fat or thin? plain or handsome?—very basic facts that create a purely physical image. Then you want to know something about the person's nature—is the person friendly? brusque? shy? domineering? considerate? selfish? If this is an important meeting, you will be fortunate, indeed, if you know someone who can describe the person for you.

An author often introduces characters in just this way—by actually describing the character in some detail. Depending on the story and on what the author wishes to accomplish, there may be considerable descriptions of physical characteristics. That was the case in "A Worn Path." Eudora Welty described how Phoenix Jackson was dressed, how she looked, how she walked, and so on. Neither Frank O'Connor nor Bernard Malamud provided many details about their characters' physical appearances. They concentrated more on the inner natures of their people.

In "Everyday Use" the author speaks through Mama, the first-person narrator of the story. Mama describes herself, her daughter Maggie, and later Dee and her friend. Walker describes the physical appearances of her characters and also tells us something about the kinds of people they are:

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. . . .

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.

Except for the burn scars, this first description of Maggie tells more about her shy, self-effacing nature than about her physical appearance. Later in the story, when you are given more bits of information about Maggie's physical appearance, the descriptions are still used to emphasize her retiring and ungainly nature.

On the other hand, in telling you about herself, Mama describes both her physical appearance and at least one side of her nature, because they seem to go together. She is fat, strong, and wears overalls and flannel nightgowns. She has the confidence and fortitude to do hard, dirty work without complaining. You can expect certain things from this kind of woman, just as you expect very different things from Maggie. And therein lies the purpose of the author's characterization. Walker is developing characters who will be useful in telling the story, who fit a purpose and a plan. The descriptions help you to understand the characters and the actions they are involved in as the story unfolds.

EXERCISE A

Read the following passage from the story and answer the questions that follow using the information you have learned in this part of the lesson.

"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.

1. Which one of the following quotations from later in the story best reflects the image of Maggie as described in this passage?
 - a. I used to think she [Dee] hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the money . . . to send her to Augusta to school.
 - b. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she [Dee] snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house.
 - c. "She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her.
 - d. Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through the motions with Maggie's hand. Maggie's hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold. . . .

2. The author uses a comparison (a metaphor) to describe both Maggie's physical appearance and her inner nature. What is Maggie compared to? Copy the description here.

Now check your answers using the Answer Key at the back of the book. Correct any wrong answers and review this part of the lesson if you do not understand why an answer is wrong.

• 2 •

Characterization Through Action and Dialogue

After you hear what an author has to say about the characters in a story, you begin to judge them yourself by what they say and do. The characters' actions and the things they say are controlled by the author, of course, just like everything else in the story is controlled. The author uses the action and dialogue to portray each person in a particular way, to develop personalities to suit the story. This is sometimes called "the dramatic method of characterization" because it is the same way characters are developed in plays and movies. Here, for instance, is a view of Dee arriving to visit her mother and sister:

"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, 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. . . . 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.

Dee is obviously showing off her new-found awareness of her African heritage. Her friend is making a display of his knowledge of Islamic customs. That attitude is fine in its place, but in the present setting it is totally inappropriate. There is no concern on the part of those two for Mama and Maggie. Dee is only concerned with impressing her country relatives with how superior she is to them in her culture and learning.

You have been told earlier how Dee hates her home, but now she is flitting around taking pictures of it. That, apparently, is not a change of heart; it's part of her affectation. Dee, it will develop, still has no love or respect for her home, her mother, or her sister. To Dee, her family and the house are interesting artifacts and part of her education in her "heritage." You also learn, later in the story, that her other interest is in acquiring her mother's valuable antiques.

As you read the passage in Exercise B, try to see how Dee and her boyfriend are developed through the dialogue between Mama and Dee.

EXERCISE B

Read the following passage from the story and answer the questions that follow using the information you have learned in this part of the lesson.

"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."

"Uhhnnh," 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.

1. What is the author pointing out about Dee/Wangero and Mama in that conversation?
- a. Mama sees her heritage in real people; Dee sees her heritage in a name change.
 - b. Mama refuses to appreciate, as Dee has, that a new era has dawned for black people.
 - c. Mama is too stubborn to benefit from Wangero's superior education.
 - d. Dee feels she is helping her mother by making her mother aware of her African heritage.
2. Copy the sentences the author uses to show how smug and arrogant Wangero and her friend are.

Now check your answers using the Answer Key at the back of the book. Correct any wrong answers and review this part of the lesson if you do not understand why an answer is wrong.

. 3 .

Characters and the Readers' Feelings

As authors present and develop their characters, they decide which ones you will have strong positive feelings for, which ones you will react very negatively to, and which ones will fall somewhere in between. Most major characters in good literature fall somewhere in between. In other words, the main characters in most stories have both strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points, just like people in real life.

As you read, even before you stop to think at length about the characters in a story, you begin to develop feelings toward them. A talented author can make

you feel precisely what he or she wants you to feel about a character. It's obvious, for example, that Alice Walker wants you to admire Mama, feel sorry for poor Maggie, and to dislike Wangero and Hakim-a-barber. Walker uses language and adopts a special tone as she tells you about each one. Whenever Maggie is described she is like a lame dog, she is cowering, or she is digging a hole in the sand with her foot. With Dee/Wangero and her friend the tone becomes sarcastic, sometimes bitterly so. The author makes a point, for instance, of describing Dee's appetite despite her city airs. There's no mistaking the author's contempt in the description of Dee gushing over the old things in the house—things she used to despise—Grandma's butter dish, the old churn, and even the rump prints on the benches.

Notice how the author subtly shapes your feelings about the characters in this passage:

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.

The author doesn't let you find any redeeming qualities in Dee for a minute. She uses words like *furtive* and *nervous* to describe Dee's friends. Dee's humor is "scalding" and "erupted like bubbles in lye." Then the author leads you to the easy inference that the "friends" only liked the "smart" and "cute" things about Dee; they didn't really like Dee as a person, and you are expected to feel the same way about her.

Even in her letters Dee is arrogant and overbearing toward her mother. But simple Maggie sees through her when she asks, "when did Dee ever *have* any friends?" That little comment by Maggie forces you to take a second look at her. The author has deliberately inserted the comment to prepare you for a reevaluation of Maggie later in the story.

EXERCISE C

Read the following passage from the story and answer the questions that using the information you have learned in this part of the lesson.

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 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.

1. What is it that makes you feel sorry for Maggie?
 - a. The author points out that Dee is much prettier than Maggie.
 - b. Dee, the narrator says, is a woman; Maggie is not.
 - c. Maggie has been badly burned and terrified by the fire.
 - d. Maggie loved the house that burned while Dee hated it.

2. Copy the sentence from the passage that is a bitter, sarcastic thought apparently designed by the author to make you dislike Dee.

Now check your answers using the Answer Key at the back of the book. Correct any wrong answers and review this part of the lesson if you do not understand why an answer is wrong.

. 4 .

Analyzing Characters

You have met many people by reading just this far in this book, and you will meet many more before you are through. Now think back over all the reading you have done throughout your life. The characters you have met through reading must number in the hundreds or even thousands. One of the great benefits of reading is that you can meet so many more people—so many

different kinds of people—than you ever meet in real life. What is more, you get to know these people intimately. You are told about their innermost thoughts and feelings. They are developed or *characterized* for you by an all-knowing observer.

What does that knowledge of people do for you? It's entertaining, for one thing, to be able to eavesdrop and peer into people's private lives. It is also an education in learning how to understand people and the reasons why they act the way they do. That is an important life skill and essential for surviving and getting ahead in a difficult world.

In "The Garden Party" you came to understand how a person reared in luxury has difficulty adjusting to others outside of her class. In "My Oedipus Complex" you were able to consider the confusion in a little boy's mind in working out his relationships with each of his parents. In "A Worn Path" you saw how powerful a force love and duty can be in a person's life. In "Everyday Use" you see the overbearing arrogance of a daughter who is very full of herself and looks down on her mother and sister.

Understanding people is character analysis. It is not just something you do for English or for a reading course. Analyzing characters is something you do every day in real life situations. Authors help educate you to understand people when they create interesting and complex characters for you to think about.

Characters are created for a variety of purposes. As you have seen, some characters are merely used for setting—the people sitting on the sidewalk in "A Summer's Reading" or the guests in "The Garden Party," for example. Other characters are given small parts to make a point or move the story along. You never get to know these people very well. The hunter and the receptionist in the doctor's office in "A Worn Path" are examples of that.

Certain characters are called "flat" because only one side of their natures is shown. Superman, for instance, is a "flat" character. He is always good, always powerful, always a winner. You never see him as a failure, he is never particularly worried about a problem, nor is he ever in doubt as to how to deal with a situation. Hakim-a-barber is a "flat" character. Alice Walker makes him a silly man and never develops him beyond this.

The main characters in stories are usually "round" characters: the author has developed them so that you can see several sides of their natures. A character may be basically good, for example, but is forced by circumstances into violating a code of ethics. You get a very thorough look at a character in such circumstances. You saw both the flighty side and the serious side of Laura in "The Garden Party." Both George and Mr. Cattanzara in "A Summer's Reading" are complex characters who require some thought on your part if they are to be understood.

Characters cannot be developed as thoroughly in short stories as they are in novels because the short-story author does not use as many words or

descriptions. There is a great deal to be learned about people, nevertheless, as you can see in this study of Maggie in "Everyday Use."

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 checker-berry 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.

It was pointed out earlier in the lesson that there are times when the author deliberately makes you take a hard look at Maggie, just as Mama does in this scene. The general picture of Maggie has been hangdog, unattractive, slow, dopey. Now you see a certain nobility, even dignity in Maggie. She is creative—she can quilt, which Dee with all her knowledge of the value of quilts cannot. Maggie has a deep-rooted sense of her heritage: "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts." She is pictured as saint-like in her patience: "This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work."

When you analyze a character, you want to look for that character's multifaceted development. It is the same in real life. Is a blustery boss all bad or is he or she really defending the company and your job? Is the politician really as good as he or she seems, or is his or her good side reserved for television appearances? It takes analysis, an examination of all sides of a person, to come up with a true picture.

EXERCISE D

Read the following passage from the story and answer the questions that follow using the information you have learned in this part of the lesson.

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,