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*by* Lmuri Mbogo

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### Character Analysis: Wangero

In Alice Walker's "*Everyday Use*," Wangero, previously called Dee, emerges as a central character whose personality and actions drive the themes related to heritage, identity, and the evolving family dynamics. Her character embodies the tension between the desire to connect with culture and the complexities of identity crisis in a changing world. As she returns home from college, her aspirations for a more culturally authentic life are most evident in her beliefs and strong sense of self. However, her actions seamlessly contrast her beliefs on traditional values and demonstrate a deep sense of irony and lack of self-awareness. Her education, relationships, and quest for authenticity reveal the ironies and contrasts inherent in her character, actions, and beliefs. Therefore, the irony and contrasts in Wangero's beliefs and actions suggest she is an all-pose, self-unaware character with a superficial persona.

Wangero's superficial persona is first portrayed in her claims for authenticity when her actions are pretentious and do not genuinely depict her beliefs. Since she went to college, her change in attitude and interests has been influenced by a strong desire to regain her cultural heritage and identity. She returns from college to reclaim treasured symbols of their culture, such as old family quilts, milk churns, and dashers. She also returns with a new name, Wangero, which she believes is true to her roots as opposed to Dee, that she "couldn't bear any longer, being named after the people who oppress" (Walker). While taking pictures, Wangero claims her

love for their house, cows, and old bench<sup>1</sup> her father made – “I never knew how lovely these benches are.” However, despite this purported love for tradition, Wangero embraces modern culture in dressing, conduct, behavior, and personal relationships. She has a long dress in hot weather, gold earrings, dangling bracelets, and a Somali boyfriend who “maybe don’t know how people shake hands” (Walker). To some extent, Wangero pretends to love her culture when her actions reflect the opposite.

Despite the changes she expresses after college, Wangero still exhibits immensely the old traits of Dee. Some primary traits that have not changed include her desire for attention, strong sense of self, jealousy for her sister Maggie, and some naivety. Her mother recalls that “Dee wanted nice things,” but she used to naively read to her Mama and sister without pity-forcing words and lies into them but shoved them away like dimwits (Walker). Wangero still exhibits these traits of Dee despite her claims of being more culturally conscious, caring about family, and informed (Kestel). On this note, Wangero may be pretending or acting to have changed to create an impression of being better. David Cowart is right that Wangero is all pose character, a person who is not genuine, and her actions are acts or pretenses influenced by a lack of self-awareness and originality. An all-pose character portrays faked physical appearance, behaviors, or ideas intended to create a good image about themselves, but the reality is different.

Wangero’s approach to the cultural value of traditional objects can be seen as superficial and contrary to their true significance. She values these items as art pieces worth preserving as a show of cultural heritage; this unnecessary valuation is ironic to the true purpose of these items. For instance, her grandmother handstitched her dresses and made quilts due to poverty, but Wangero thinks she did so for cultural reasons. All these items she claims were once put to everyday use due to lack of better alternatives, but now she thinks even her sister Maggie should

not have them because <sup>2</sup> “she’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use” (Walker). Such an irony and contrast exposes Wagero as someone pretending in their behavior and not genuine about their actions. It is also ironic that Wagero vehemently wants to claim old items of her grandmother but strongly rejects her name.

Dee is a family name inherited from Grandma Dee, passed down to Aunt Big Dee, and now to Wagero, who mysteriously thinks the name is not suitable for her. Rejecting a name inherited from a grandmother but claiming the old items from the same grandmother also means Wagero is naïve or self-unaware. She thinks the name Wagero Deewanika Kemanjo reflects her African heritage, but she does not fully understand the meanings or origins of these names. Such an irony is also evident when a self-proclaimed, culturally sensitive woman brings home a Somali boyfriend who also claims to accept his family <sup>1</sup> doctrines, “but farming and raising cattle is not my style” (Walker). Hakim-a-barber is not only from a different culture but also insensitive to his own culture and that of Wagero’s family, such as eating collards and pork. On this note, there is a significant irony in how Wagero, the cultural champion, has a boyfriend who conflicts with her culture and does not express any sensitivity or respect for her family’s lifestyle. To some extent, they are either pretending – showing a superficial persona, or naïve and insensitive.

But it is even more worrying that the only woman with higher education is the most insensitive to the fundamental values of family and culture. Since the days she was called Dee, Wagero has always been the intellectual champion in the family who read to her mother, sister, and friends before further studies at Augusta. Today, she claims she is the most culturally informed and better placed to inherit the ‘family treasures.’ She even <sup>4</sup> tells her mother, “you just don’t understand... your heritage” (Walker). But Wagero claims to understand that her heritage is too insensitive to realize the value of people and relationships as a stronger cultural heritage

than the quilts, churns, or dashes. She is too naive to recognize her connection with her mother and sister as a valuable means of preserving heritage. Wangero rejects her family's traditional way of life, criticizing their home and lifestyle as outdated, yet she takes family heirlooms and enjoys their meal. Thus, she could act, pretend, or be insensitive and arrogant.

The contrast between Wangero's education and insensitivity is also evident when she keeps undermining her sister, Maggie, perhaps with jealousy and disregard. She tells Maggie, "you ought to try to make something of yourself too," after taking the quilts that Mama planned to give Maggie. Even when Mama suggests that Maggie "can always make some more, Maggie knows how to quilt," Wangero still expresses hatred and jealousy (Walker). On this note, Wangero clearly lacks self-awareness and does not recognize the irony in her actions, weaknesses, and lack of empathy. She thinks education made her more intelligent than others when she is the one who cannot quilt, cannot love family members, and does not understand cultural heritage. Everything about her, including how she dresses, walks, and talks, depicts someone with a weak connection to family or culture, but she claims to be the most culturally sensitive and concerned person.

Therefore, the irony and contrasts in Wangero's beliefs and actions suggest she is an all-pose, self-unaware character with a superficial persona. She claims originality and authenticity when her actions are pretentious and do not genuinely depict her beliefs. Although going to college has changed her views on culture, family, and identity, her actions ironically contradict her beliefs and show insensitivity and pretense. For instance, she changes her name from one with family connection to something she does not understand; she claims old items as more culturally worthy than connection with family members; she disregards her mother and sister as culturally ignorant when her boyfriend is of a different culture and disrespects hers.

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