

Modernism and Postmodernism in “Everyday Use”

The modernist movement was a reaction to nineteenth-century realism as Hawthorne(1994, p.120) states, “In general usage, though, modernism describes that art (not just literature) which sought to break with what had become the dominant and dominating conventions of nineteenth-century art and culture.” Alice Walker’s short story *Everyday Use* is a tale of a black Afro-American mother’s relationship with her two daughters. According to Barry(1995, p.81), “Without an understanding of modernism, then, it is impossible to understand twentieth-century culture.” This essay will seek to discuss the postmodern and modern characteristics in the text. The conclusions will be examined in order to gain an understanding of the possible implications and underlying meaning the text may have.

A characteristic of modernism is the belief in a “unified, complex, underlying reality”, (Rossiter, 2004). A Pattern of symbolism is utilised, in the text, to represent this underlying “Grande Historie” or “Grand Narrative”. The misconception of modern Afro-American heritage is represented through the use of a cultural symbol in *Everyday Use*. The modernist underlying meaning or “Grand Narrative” is characterized through the symbolic value of the quilt in the story. Mama’s statement regarding her education , “I never had an education myself.”(Madden, 2002, p.45) does not prevent her from understanding and respecting her past. This understanding, and respect, is identified in Mama’s ability to associate the fabric of the quilt with the peoples clothing it was manufactured from

“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 Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the civil war.”(Madden, 2002, p.48)

The quilts are special to Mama, they provide a physical link to the people of her past, her heritage. Moreover Mama's touching of these items allows her to feel her people, and remember, relive, her past. The quilt is representative, to Mama, of her past, her family and her heritage. The underlying "Grand narrative, the misunderstanding of this heritage, is portrayed in the daughters different relationships to this symbolic item.

In examining Dee and Maggie's relationship to the quilt, the symbol of their heritage, the underlying modernist "Grand Narrative" of the text can be revealed. Dee has no understanding of the real value of the quilt. Dee's ignorance is evident in her statement that she will "Hang them"(Madden, 2002, p.49). Maggie conversely expresses a deeper understanding of the value of the quilt and the family heritage. After Dee requests the quilts, Maggie says, "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts". Maggie, who was taught to quilt by Grandma Dee, is sharing with the reader the real value, to her, of the quilt. The quilt is a memory of her past and symbolic of her family heritage. Up until this point in the story Mama has described Maggie with disappointment and a sense of shame toward her. However Mama's attitude to Maggie changes, when upon realising, when looking at Maggie "hard", she sees something in her that she has not seen before, the history of the family and her mother and sister. It is in this realization that Mama makes her decision to give the quilts to their rightful, and proper owner, Maggie. The underlying "Grand Narrative" is that of Dee's, portrayed as a modern Afro-American, misconception toward her family heritage. Ironically it is Dee who remarks that Mama and Maggie "Don't understand"(Madden, 2002, p.49) their heritage. Whereas Mama and Maggie are part of this heritage, they can manufacture quilts and they understand the historical value of the quilt. Dee, however, displays no such deeper understanding only valuing the quilt for it's aesthetically pleasing value.

The narrative utilises another characteristic Modernist trait , that of stream of consciousness.

A characteristic of modernism is a shift of focus to concentrating on the internal experience. According to Barry(1995, p.82), “a new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on *how* we see rather than *what* we see.”. This internalisation is best characterised by the use of stream of consciousness, a literary strategy designed to give readers the impression that they are reading the intimate impressions of a character’s mind. Stream of consciousness narrative is used by the author to tell the story from Mama Johnson’s, in the first person, viewpoint. This is evidenced in Mama’s description of her back yard , which is given a personal characteristic , “A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know.”(Madden, 2002, p.43). The implication of Mama’s knowing more than most people, and sharing her personal feelings about the yard are indicative of stream of consciousness. Moreover Mama’s sentiments represent her inner feelings, an intimate impression of her mind, toward the yard. Furthermore another example of this internalisation is Mama’s feelings toward the dress Dee wears , “I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out”.(Madden, 2002, p.46). Mama once again is sharing her intimate impressions, her feelings toward this dress, the colour so bright it physically warms her face. A characteristic aspect of modernism is the tendency for text to be self reflexive.

Self reflexivity is another characteristic of the modern. This characteristic is apparent in a text that occasionally refers to itself as a story , or as Barry(1995, p.82) states, “A tendency toward ‘reflexivity’, so that poems, plays and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role.” This is apparent in *Everyday use* when Mama’s says “Sometimes I dream a dream”(Madden, 2002, p.43). The implication is that of the

dream within a dream, the story within a story. Furthermore this characteristic is identifiable in another statement of Mama's "In real life..."(Madden,2002,p.43). The importance of the story reiterating to the reader it is in the realm of the real, not in a dream world, therefore it is real life in a story. The story is about real life, told in a story. This is Mama's definition of her story, that it is real. This definition of the reality of the text is the text reaffirming it's value as real, a modernist characteristic.

A Post-modern characteristic is the notion of *pastiche*. Moon(2001, p.106), describes this as, "As artistic production began to look increasingly like industrial production, many artists began using techniques such as *pastiche* – that is, borrowing and combining elements of other artwork to produce new objects." In literature this *pastiche* can take form in the use of many elements and genres ,together with situations and characters, in a parody of the original work. The element of *pastiche* is used effectively in Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* in portraying the relationships between Mama and Dee. The author has used a parody of a cultural myth, the 'prodigal son', to represent Dee. Dee has left her home to seek her fortune , left the family to seek the bright outside world. Now Dee returns to her rural home, after a long period without contact , evident in Mama's statement "She wrote once..."(Madden, 2002, p.45). The parody however, on the myth, becomes apparent as instead of the warm welcome the mythical prodigal son receives when he returns, Mama feels repugnance to Dee's egotism, as a young woman. Mama's distaste is evidenced in her comment , "Often I fought off the temptation to shake her". Moreover Mama does not shower her with gifts instead Dee demands the gifts, and is refuted, "snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands."(Madden, 2002, p.49).One could argue that Mama's sudden use of the term "Miss" indicates Mamas feeling of alienation toward her daughter, no longer called Dee or Wangero, but referred to as a Miss. This is a formal title , not something used in

conversation to a daughter. The implication is that Dee is now a stranger, unloved, someone not familiar to Mama. This use and parody of an existing cultural myth is an indicative characteristic of postmodernism.

The implications of the postmodern or modernist characteristics found in a text can help to define the underlying meaning of the text. Alice Walker's text is a powerful story of the misunderstanding of traditional heritage. The story effectively uses stream of consciousness to portray Mama Johnson's internalized emotion. The author has utilized a recurrent cultural symbol, the quilt, to represent the Afro-American heritage. Walker has created a story that is a parody of a biblical myth. A discussion of modernist and post modernist characteristics has revealed the underlying value of the text.

References

- Barry, P.(1995). *Beginning theory: an introduction to literary and cultural theory*.
Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Hawthorne, J. (1994). *A concise glossary of contemporary literary theory* (2nd ed.).
London, GB: Edward Arnold.
- Madden, D.(2002). *A pocketful of prose: vintage short fiction* (Vol. II.).
South Melbourne: Nelson Thomson Learning
- Moon, B.(2001). *Literary terms: a practical glossary* (2nd ed.).
Cottosloe: Chalkface Press P/L
- Rossiter, R.(2004, April). *Reading the modernist text*. Lecture notes presented at
lecture, Edith Cowen University, Perth, WA.