Alice Walker is making a statement about the popularization of black culture in “Everyday Use." The story involves characters from both sides of the African American cultural spectrum, conveniently cast as sisters in the story. Dee/Wangero represents the “new black,” with her natural hairdo and brightly colored clothing. Maggie remains traditional: the unchanged, unaffected bystander. Nowhere in the dialogue do Walker's characters directly mention their feelings about the Americanization of African tradition. But Walker somehow gets the reader to believe this popularization itself can actually turn into a form of exploitation. By telling the story from the mother's point of view, Walker's representation of Wangero is seeped in irony, and therefore Wangero's love of her African heritage becomes an exploitation of it.

Because the mother is so closely related to the characters in the story, her perception of them is biased. Walker uses this point of view to her advantage, because while the reader is familiar with Wangero's somewhat stereotypical "blacksplotive" personality, this aspect of her personality remains completely foreign to her mother, the narrator, who describes it with an innocent wonder. In the beginning of the story the
mother speaks of Wangero's actions in the past. Even then she displayed an arrogance that isolated her mother and younger sister, but the mother was too busy being proud of her daughter's achievements to notice. She says, "At sixteen [Dee] had a style of her own, and she knew what style was. She used to read to us, without pity. [We sat] trapped and ignorant underneath her voice." The mother admits to her own ignorance in front of Dee, but does not seem bothered by it. Now that Dee/Wangero has come home, the mother describes her with the same naivete. She says Dee wears "a dress so loud it hurts my eyes. Her hair...stands straight up like wool on a sheep." The mother is also surprised that Wangero feels oppressed by her Christian name, "Dee," a white name, possibly a slave-owner's.

As far as the narrator is concerned, Dee was named after her aunt Dicie, who was named after Grandma Dee and so on, since before the Civil War. "Why should I trace it that far back?" the mother asks Wangero. Then, for the reader's sake, adds, "[Asalamalakim] and Wangero sent eye signals over my head." The mother is aware of what's going on. After all, she observes this action. But she may not be aware of the connotations these eye signals carry. Walker does not allow the mother to elaborate, so the couple's optic conversation is left up to the imagination of the reader. The reader knows the look represents Wangero's patient tolerance of what she interprets as her traditional mother's passive ignorance. In both cases the mother just describes what she sees. The reader, on the other hand, immediately knows what kind of character the mother is dealing with.
Wangero is abrasive. She asks to keep items from the house, items Maggie and her mother still use every day. She talks down to her mother and sister. She is a tourist in her own culture. We know this only because of small hints the narrator gives, all dropped without passing harsh judgment on Wangero. This technique is key to the story; it allows the reader, and the reader only, to pass judgment upon Wangero, therefore understanding the theme of the story. "She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. Everything delighted her," the narrator says, as neutral as she could possibly be. And when Wangero wants to take a quilt from Maggie to hang on her wall, the narrator speculates, "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." The mother is also ashamed of her house, and knows Dee will be embarrassed by it as well. "No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down," she thinks to herself. And while the narrator seems puzzled by Wangero's new style and behavior, the reader knows exactly what's going on and begins to resent Wangero even more. The quilts themselves are symbols in the story, interpreted in different ways by the narrator, the author, the reader, and Wangero. Again Walker uses the narrator's simplicity to her advantage. While Wangero sees the quilts as a symbol of her heritage, the narrator sees them only literally, as blankets to be used, not saved for cultural posterity. When Wangero insists she take the quilts instead of leaving them to Maggie, the narrator admits to confusion. Stumped, she asks, "What would you do with them?" Wangero wants to hang them on the wall, "as if that was the only thing you could do with quilts," the narrator comments. Naturally
Wangero's interest in decoration baffles the narrator, and it is this simplified confusion that helps the reader sympathize with the narrator and Maggie, and loathe Wangero's presence.

To further illustrate the gap between mother and daughter, and to paint Wangero as an intruder with unrealistic expectations of her traditional African American family, Walker allows the mother to describe a dream she once had about "Dee." The dream exemplifies the distinction between what the mother actually is, and how she would like to appear in front of Wangero. Though the mother is possibly closer to her African heritage than Wangero, she still feels ashamed in her daughter's presence. "In real life," she says, "I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands." In the dream, however, where the mother appears on a television show with Wangero, she is "the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake." Looking carefully at this statement, the reader realizes that while Wangero tries to glean more of her African heritage from her mother, she is slowly making her mother more ashamed of her dark skin, her culture. The mother describes her ideal skin shade as the color of an uncooked barley pancake, a food that is perhaps tan at best. Once again, the mother continues on about the dream without realizing the weight of what she is saying. It is the reader's -- and Walker's -- responsibility to understand the real theme imbedded in the story.

In the same way that the reader dislikes Wangero in "Everyday Use," so Alice Walker seems to dislike the type of black American who uses his or her cultural identity as a status symbol. It is not a hatred that Walker displays in her story, but rather a playful poking-fun-of, which wouldn't have been possible had "Everyday Use" not been told
from the perspective of the mother. This is exactly how the point of view affected the theme of "Everyday Use."
Works Cited