

English 1102 Critical Thinking Exercise
Teaching Comparison/Contrast with
Alice Walker's Short Story "Everyday Use"

Assignment: In my English 1102 class, we read and watch the film version of Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." As with all film adaptations, details are left out, changed, or created to aid in adapting the story to the screen. I ask students to pay close attention to characters and objects in the story, as well as in the film.

Once we finish watching the film, we discuss the similarities and differences they observe. One of the most noted differences deals with the churn. In the story, Walker says that Dee only takes the lid and the dasher of the churn. Also, Dee places a plate over the churn base that is filled with clabbered cream ready for churning. However, in the film when Dee and her friend Hakim-a-barber are leaving, Dee has the lid and dasher while a Hakim-a-barber has the empty bottom of the churn.

Then, I have them write a short piece in class about if and how differences from the book to the film change the story. Most write about the metaphor of the churn and note that the churn would not function without the lid and dasher and that it serves as a metaphor for the family's brokenness. There are usually other observations, as well. As an extension of this lesson, I plan to make butter with the students since most students have never made butter before. Plus, making butter will engage them and add to the classroom atmosphere.

Rationale: Close reading of the story and paying special attention to the film help students develop a critical eye in more than one medium. Students also develop their inference skills. This story is emotionally charged and requires students to reflect on the roles of the family members. Also, students must weigh the evidence as presented in the story and the film to support their claims.

Adaptability: This assignment could be used in other disciplines. For example, many historical documentaries exist that could bring the past to life for modern students. The professor could talk about various theories about events that happened and discuss why some theories are problematic. Films also are filled with psychological and sociological topics that could be evaluated. The only math-related film I can think of is *A Beautiful Mind*, but I'm sure a math professor would be able to discuss that better than I.

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