Moving Principles With Personalities

Paine and Wollstonecraft in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

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> *Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.* —Lord Brougham, in a speech to the House of Commons, 1828

Is it society, or is it individual responsibility?

Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine believed that the ability of an individual to decide for his or herself what is right, or fair, or just, and then act accordingly relied on education. For Mary Wollstonecraft, it was a question of how the individual was educated; Paine wanted to know when. Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" picks up on these two ideas, and while it may never be known if she was thinking in terms of Paine's or Wollstonecraft's philosophy, it is possible to acknowledge the presence of such ideologies in the twentieth-century. Her efforts illustrate how fictitious personalities help advance the principles of equality, education, and autonomy through each century.

Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft suggests the effect society has on an individual's ability to reason begins during the individual's early education. The purpose of education, Wollstonecraft contends, should be to form citizens whose hearts are cultivated and "open to the various modifications of humanity" (182). Wollstonecraft directs her focus to the two dominant eighteenth-century forms of education: public education (boarding school) and country day school (the one room schoolhouse). The latter she "recollects with pleasure" and argues that if children of both sexes are educated together, as was often the case, then those children are better able to understand the true nature of one another. This "mixed" class standing encourages (in fact, requires) children to interact and experience the differences between them. Born out of these early experiences is the development of a personality influenced by the heart, not a young and unreasonable mind. The children eventually form what Wollstonecraft calls the main pillars of friendship: respect and confidence.

Wollstonecraft notes that the tradition of sending a child away to school allows weak minds to cultivate prejudiced opinions and vain understanding. The key to Wollstonecraft's argument is her prevailing opinion that children of both sexes should be educated in terms of academics and family relationships. Sending a child away to school removes the parental influence; children have only schoolmasters (whom they resent) and servants (whom they torment) as figures of authority. This limitation, or selective audience, does not allow children the opportunity to "exercise the affections of a son and a brother" (185). It does not give children the opportunity to experience a full, loving relationship before they become adults.

The depiction of a limping educational system extends to include both approaches. Wollstonecraft points to children's retention of trivial, declarative knowledge. These children, she points out, are encouraged by the educational system to fill their minds with facts, names, and passages in Greek while missing the chance to cultivate human relations and understanding. The reason Wollstonecraft gives for this misdirection in education is a social one. Society is formed in such a way that it reinforces the idea of showpieces. For example, Wollstonecraft describes the practice of parents rushing off to hear their children publicly recite Latin. These children are forced to perform, and then the parents hold social commentaries on how intelligent the children appear. Wollstonecraft believes this dangerously narrows a child's respect for education. By giving value to the performance instead of the possession of knowledge, children are rewarded for knowledge of Plato, but not for having an understanding of virtue.

A subsequent link in the chain is the dependence of women on appearance. Similar to children being praised for social performance, women are praised for "susceptibility of the heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste" (11). A woman's individuality and ability to exercise reason (decision making) are not reinforced. Women, Wollstonecraft contends, develop within a society which provides rewards for a successful social performance, and not individual autonomy. Eighteenth-century examples include playing the piano, knowing a small amount of French (unless of course, you are French) and letting the man make the decisions. Reason, judgement, or any other virtuous function that "must arise from the play of the mind" is not viewed as important; thus, it has never formed.

Men are also affected by this practice. Social norms dictate that a women of such characteristics as tenderness and beauty is worthy of pursuit; and so this "chase" allows women to exercise a tyranny over men. This practice of worshiping women for qualities typically associated with "weakness" leaves men responding in awe at the appearance of a woman and not the actual

personality. Wollstonecraft refers to this as a "pedestal syndrome." The result is that women, so long as they remain "attractive," are elevated within society; yet they are never perceived as true equals. They are pampered and viewed as property.

The key to Wollstonecraft's argument is accepting the lack of moral development caused by society. She, like Edmund Burke, believes in an early association of ideas that come from the "small platoons" to which we attach ourselves: "It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of our country and to mankind" (Burke 135). The lack of developed reason begins with a limping educational system; but, seeing the influence of an entire social system which stresses appearance instead of understanding, Wollstonecraft sees the individual progressively losing control. Social order and acceptance leads individuals to act in accordance with what the "group" decides is right, not what they themselves have been allowed to reason is right.

Wollstonecraft asks, "Can [women] deserve blame for acting according to principles so constantly inculcated?" (135). She answers by saying that women are part of a system that is flawed. They are not completely responsible for themselves, but they are accountable to the next generation of women. They must, she argues, begin the slow motion of change by educating themselves and their children. She is sympathetic to the degrading system in which women develop, but she is also realistic enough to expand her vision into a long term solution where following generations can continue where the previous ones left off. Wollstonecraft is looking to the future where society is based on progressive reason, and not unjust tradition.

Thomas Paine: *Rights of Man*

Thomas Paine believed man's ability to reason to be natural. This optimistic view of an intrinsic knowledge to reason lends itself to a short-term view; but, at the same time, it does not imply a "quick fix" solution to the problems of equality and education. Paine's attention is focused on the immediacy of actions that should follow self-actualization. For example, in a letter to M. De Lafayette, Paine writes: "Mankind, as it appears to me, are always ripe enough to understand their true interest, provided it be presented clearly to their understanding" (151). This statement enforces the idea that a rational and virtuous society can be established as fast as the society is educated. Paine illustrates this example by saying that a person, someone who has never seen this world, would assume that the "hordes of miserable poor" belong to societies which have not had the time to establish proper governments (160). It is a person's natural instinct to partake in a society, and government, which

offers to best protect their rights. These rights, which are generally understood to include: life, liberty and possession, do not necessarily come out of society, as if they were granted, but come out a person's own rational interest in themselves. This is the beginning, and quickly extends itself to include a rational interest in the whole of mankind, in turn, comprised of rational individuals.

Paine's attention to a person's natural instinct for what is "just" raises the question of validity. How valid is a person's own instinct? It needs to be based on something. Paine concludes that it rests on what he refers to as "the duty of man." The duty of man consists of two points: a duty to God, and a duty to respect one's neighbor as one would want to be respected (67). Both are important themes because they follow up what Mary Wollstonecraft referred to as "the grand ideal outline of human nature" (Wollstonecraft 28). Human nature is the base; educating men, erecting civil societies, and living within the collective interest of the public are all born out of an attention to human nature. The validation itself, Paine contends, is apparent because this recipe creates societies that are accountable to its citizens and, in the absence of a higher authority, are accountable to God. The obvious shortcomings to this line of thought involve questions of "God." It would seem reasonable—even required—to consider any form of religion, regardless of specific practice. Paine answered this concern by noting that, to his knowledge, most religions of the world are a result of the doctrine that all men are created equal.

Alice Walker: *"Everyday Use"*

The characters in Alice Walker's, "Everyday Use" operate within distinct systems of reason. While it would be unfair and inaccurate to label or limit the characters according to either a "Wollstonecraft" or "Paine" approach, it is possible to the developing patterns of both ideologies. Mary Wollstonecraft's system of society molding the individual and Thomas Paine's view of an individual's personal power to impact their circumstances are woven together to form an interchange of doctrines illuminating the individual's position in society.

It is important to note that the narration of the story comes from the mother. Walker's subtle change from the present to past tense in the middle of the narrative helps to show the mother's evolving attitude. This change also allows the distinctly different reasoning processes of the two sisters to be evaluated by the mother because of the "before and after" effect. This brilliant approach affords the reader an opportunity to see more than the characters; readers see social programming and, as the story evolves, they see the way this programming can change.

The three family members—Maggie, Dee, and the mother—all represent "Wollstonecraft" women. First is the mother. Walker's initial description of the mother as "large" and "big boned . . . with rough, man-working hands" is completely opposite of the mother's fantasy to be "a hundred pounds lighter" with hair that glistens and a "quick and witty tongue" (1559). The "Wollstonecraft" model applies because the mother is the opposite of an idol. She will never partake in "pedestal syndrome." She is, of course, under the influence of social norms but she is not held to a standard of delicacy and refinement; she is limited to wearing "flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day" (1559). This fantasy to be slim and intelligent is nothing more than an ideal shaped by, among other things, the way the mother believes Dee, her daughter, would want her to appear and behave. The unfortunate reality is that the mother talks to white men with "one foot raised in flight" and has an overwhelming inability to exercise any opinions outside her own social role. She is hard, manlike and conditioned to staying within this defined social role. Such limitations, according to Wollstonecraft, could not have initially come from the mother's early understanding of herself, they had to of come from a defective and cruel social education.

Maggie is similar to her mother. She also personifies the limitations of poor, uneducated, and black. Her own understanding is that she is "homely and ashamed," with an expectancy that "good looks and money" are never to be hers. She too is unique to the Wollstonecraft model in that she will never be held on a pedestal, nor will she ever exercise a short-lived tyranny over men. Her only hope is to find satisfaction in marrying a man who her mother says shows "mossy teeth in an earnest face" (1560).

Dee, on the other hand, epitomizes the object of idol. She is described by her mother as a "well turned phrase, a cute shape," with "nicer hair and a fuller figure" than her sister; and while the mother's foot is raised and ready to run, Dee will "look anyone in the eye" (1559). Dee's mind and manners appear to the mother as forged from an iron will, products of a woman who knows what she wants from life not simply manipulated and shaped by society. Here the reader's ironic distance allows Dee's dependence on social practice to begin surfacing. In a significant side-note, the mother reveals that Dee's attention was often focused on seeking out affections from men. In fact, while growing up, Dee often relieved her mother and sister in order to "turn all her faultfinding" on men exercising a tyranny.

The key to seeing Dee in the light of a Wollstonecraft model is her understanding that appearance equals power. The mother observes: "At sixteen [Dee] had a style of her own; and knew what style was" (1560). She also remembers how Dee would "read to [her and Maggie] without pity; forcing

words, lies, other folks habits," in an effort to remind them of their ignorance. In effect, the young Dee worked to separate herself from what she saw as country, ugly, and weak; she did not want her own family staining her developing social image of beauty, culture, and social acceptance.

The parental influence in the story equates to a social education in that the mother understands each child's defined social role and reinforces such roles. For example, the mother and the local church raised money to send Dee away to school because they (the congregation) recognized Dee's ability to succeed. It is also implied that they recognized Maggie's inability to move outside of her "simple" socially defined role and become educated. What becomes interesting is how the mother accepts and reinforces such roles. She fantasizes about "tottering in weakly from backstage" and embracing her child, the one who "made it," while Johnny Carson tries to keep up with her snappy remarks. Then she is brought back to reality and reminds herself that it is a mistake: "Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue?" (1559). The entire episode not only shows the mother's internal desire to change roles to be a stylish and intelligent woman but it also helps to outline the mother's perception of each child. Maggie is simple, Dee is special, and they are treated as such. Also, by admitting that a Johnson never had a quick tongue, the mother puts distance between her family past generations of ignorance and low social standing and her daughter Dee.

The effectiveness of a mother's attention (or lack of attention) is questioned by the way the two sisters develop. In "Everyday Use," the mother is attentive to one child (Maggie) but has allowed the other to be formed by "other folk's" education and influence. The initial results are similar to what Wollstonecraft described in her comments on different educational settings (home verses boarding school). The mother is attentive to Maggie because Maggie mirrors the mother. The mother is familiar with how a girl like Maggie should be raised and educated because she was once like Maggie. Dee, on the other hand, is out of the mother's hands (similar to being under the direction of a boarding school master). Dee has a style of her own, a style the mother does not fully understand. Both children are effected by their mother but Dee is outside of the mother's limited social understanding. The mother is seen (both by herself and by Dee) as ignorant and plain. Without the ability to set Dee on her parental knee and recount to feats of the day, the mother is left only to share moments with Maggie. Again, the mother is attentive to both children (as mothers are), but she is comfortably attentive to Maggie. Is attention the same as wisdom? Maggie is educated by her mother in ways which cause them both to appear simple, plain, content, and to be labeled homely. In this case, initially, it seems that sharing the feats of the day have not encouraged and formed a rational or autonomous minds.

Dee's having gone away to school is an important point when considering Wollstonecraft's view of community influence. Dee, in a sense, is allowed to go to college because she is the opposite of the mother. She has all the tools to succeed. She is also willing to "stare down any disaster" and parade her individual style. The community recognized Dee's ability, and thus she was removed from the mother, given the opportunity of cultivate herself, and eventually became part of another community.

Community influence takes on a new meaning as Dee brings home the values she has learned in college. These values cultivated opinions are representative of the type of social education Wollstonecraft described attention to social order. The mother realizes her inability to compete with the high social standing that Dee has brought home with her, and so her only defense materializes in fantasies of bridging the gap from one end of the social spectrum to the other. She, like Maggie, eyes Dee "with a mixture of envy and awe." Dee is cultured. Dee is gentle. Dee has surfaced at the top of the social order and also has the ability to get what she wants by being the type of woman who is "neat looking, as if God had shaped [her] with a certain style." She has been educated by her new community and, more importantly, she has succeed in the community that the mother will never be able to understand.

The turning point in the story is when Dee returns home on a visit and announces that she has changed her name. "'No mama,' she says. 'Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!'" Her reasoning is that she "couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppressed [her]" (1562). The irony is that Dee has returned home with a set of values causing her to abandon her family name in order to come closer to her "heritage." When the mother reminds her that she was named according to her heritage, Dee is quick to dismiss the reasoning as ignorant and begins to "send eye signals" over the mother's head.

The story now becomes told in the past tense, as if the mother is suddenly reflective and able to put the situation into perspective. The details in this reflective narration undermine Dee's sense of heritage and show it to be false. Dee runs through the small house pointing to the different things, functional things like sitting benches that she wants to take home and display as a tribute to her heritage. After dinner, Dee (Wangero) settles at the foot of the bed, pulls out two quilts that had been pieced together by "Grandma Dee," and tells her mother that she wants them to hang on her wall at home a testimony to heritage. The mother hesitates, and then says, "The truth is . . . I promised to give them quilts to Maggie." Here the mother shows her simple intentions to pass along something because of its use, something she herself would use. The idea of hanging quilts on the wall as a sign of history never occurred to the mother because they were not made for hanging. This logic

appears pathetic to Dee: "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts . . . . She probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (1564). Differences in education, community, and reason have surfaced immediately. De has demonstrated her detachment from what the mother and Maggie hold a a value: simple everyday use.

Thomas Paine's "natural instinct" approach to reason could be used b both parties because they both want what they feel is rational based on thei different social educations. Dee reasons her way to seeing the quilts as irre placeable reminders. The mother decides that everyday use is why the quilt were made and it is the function they should perform. An ironic distanc allows the reader to see Dee as pretentious and vain and even the mothe begins to realize that pretentiousness and vanity do not equal true reason.

Paine's principles serving to change society by starting with the indi vidual an individual's "gut feeling" can be seen in the actions of the mothe From her perspective, the mother would never be able to unlearn or chang the system that taught Dee. Nor does it seem accurate to assume Alice Walke would try to change society by giving her readers a cliche like poor girl know best. The mother is tempted to give-in and let the quilts be reduced to art, but, when Maggie tells her mother that the entire episode is not worth th argument, that she "can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts," the true nature of heritage is exposed. Seeing her Maggie standing in the door with "a kind of dopey, hangdog look," the mother is moved by Maggie's understanding and respect for true family values. Consequently, she honors Maggie's willingness to sacrifice something in a sense, the only thing she had due in the world, by sending Dee away without the quilts. In fact, she is so impressed by her daughter's spirit and this new found freedom that she likens the entire episode to a religious awakening. Not only has she battled through the simple expectations that she (and society) had for Maggie, but she has also stood up to Dee. She faced and conquered the social conditioning that taught her own daughter to see her as simple and ignorant. She sends Dee, and all the false expectations, out the door and realizes her own reasoning process is enough to succeed within any world.

This resolution, Thomas Paine might have said, is the beginning of a change in society. As Dee returns to her life in the "outside" world, she takes with her the knowledge of mother's reasoning: The real value in heritage is that it begins with family. The mother, with her hard country experience and limited social education, has served her daughter with a lesson in reason. She has put Dee's education and world into perspective.

The mother and Maggie also illustrate Paine's two points regarding the duty of man. They serve their duty to God by keeping in mind what they

think is right. They are convinced that it is what God would want. For example, when the mother realizes the sacrifice that Maggie is willing to make, she concludes, "This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work" (1564). The mother's recognition of Maggie's simple, yet still rational understanding shows how country and weak does not cause a person to serve in blind obedience. Maggie understood that she was making a decision based on what she believed and then she held the decision up against what she thought God would want. This fulfills Paine's ideology. These two women have been conditioned through education and social norms to assume they are weak, yet they rise above this to instinctively make a powerful and rational decision.

A statement by Dee towards the end of the story illustrates another fundamental use of Wollstonecraft's principles. See has been rejected by her family because she has been "unreasonable." She does not understand what the sister and mother understand because she is speaking through the effects of formal education, social role playing, and her own cultivated ignorance. She tells Maggie: "You ought to try and make something of yourself . . . . It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you' d never know it" (1565). What Wollstonecraft allows is that Maggie and Mama are in a new day. Both of them have found their own voice and are not subjugated or neglected by the roles that poor, uneducated women are expected to fill.

Alice Walker's humble opinion of her work simply being something she saw and something she wrote is a valid point. The efforts by women (or any group) to advance themselves can often leave them struggling against a tide of superficial goals. The knowledge gained by Maggie and the mother is what will allow them to accept and then build on their situation in life. It will be a comfort for them knowing they have power over themselves. The presentation of this revelation is effective because it is real. Women do have an obligation to themselves, but it is the obligation to be honest. Alice Walker and other female writers have this same obligation. If they want principles to "turn wheels" in the mind of an audience, then they have to present the material in an honest and realistic fashion. Combining a sense of distance with a responsible perspective allows authors to create characters who help educate readers. It becomes the opportunity, and shared responsibility, of women writers initiate a change in society by changing the individual. All of their creations, all of their inspirations, and all of their decisions help lead society to a place where it truly understands what Wollstonecraft meant when she wrote, "I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (71).

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