Girl Study Guide

Girl by Jamaica Kincaid

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

First published in the June 26, 1978, issue of *The New Yorker*, "Girl" was the first of what would become more than a dozen short stories Jamaica Kincaid published in that magazine. Five years later, "Girl" appeared as the opening story in Kincaid's collection of stories, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), her first book.

"Girl" is a one-sentence, 650-word dialogue between a mother and daughter. The mother does most of the talking; she delivers a long series of instructions and warnings to the daughter, who twice responds but whose responses go unnoticed by the mother. There is no introduction of the characters, no action, and no description of setting. The mother's voice simply begins speaking, "Wash the white clothes on Monday," and continues through to the end. Like all of Kincaid's fiction, "Girl" is based on Kincaid's own life and her relationship with her mother. Although the setting is not speci- fied in the story, Kincaid has revealed in interviews that it takes place in Antigua, her island birthplace.

When *At the Bottom of the River* was reviewed in major publications, reviewers praised the rhythm and beauty of the language and found the motherdaughter relationship fascinating, especially as it changes and develops throughout the volume. But a few, including the novelist Anne Tyler, found them too opaque. Tyler called the stories "almost insultingly obscure," but still encouraged readers to read the volume and to follow the career of "a writer who will soon, I firmly believe, put those magical tools of hers to work on something more solid."

Author Biography

Raised in Antigua, a small and beautiful island nation in the Caribbean, Kincaid experienced firsthand the colonialism that affects so many of her characters. Antigua was a colony of Great Britain, when Kincaid was born on May 25, 1949, and given the name Elaine Potter Richardson. Elaine's mother, Annie Richardson Drew, was a believer in obeah, a West Indian religion incorporating magic and ritual. For nine years Elaine was an only child, and felt happy and loved. She began school when she was four, the same year her mother taught her to read. She was a bright student. When her three brothers were born, she felt that her mother turned away from her; a longing for a reconciliation with a distant mother is a recurring theme in Kincaid's work.

Elaine's adolescent years were turbulent. She became aware of various ways that black Antiguans were made to serve the British, and she rebelled, especially at school, where the children were taught English history, geography and literature instead of Caribbean. In June, 1966, at seventeen, Elaine left Antigua to become an au pair in New York. Over the next seven years she worked as an au pair, a receptionist, and a secretary; studied photography; and eventually began a career in publishing. Her first publication was an interview with feminist Gloria Steinem for *Ingenue* magazine. Soon afterward, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid, "Jamaica" for the Caribbean country, and "Kincaid" because it "just seemed to go together with Jamaica."

As Jamaica Kincaid, she wrote articles for various magazines and became a staff writer for the *New Yorkermagazine in 1976. She would write more than eighty essays for the magazine in the next decade. One afternoon, after reading an Elizabeth Bishop poem, "In the Waiting Room," Kincaid sat down and wrote the short story "Girl" in one sitting. As she tells it, she found her voice as a writer that afternoon: "I somehow got more confident in what I knew about language. Finding your voice brings great confidence." The story, which is one long sentence spoken by a Caribbean mother to her daughter, appeared in the New Yorker in the June 26, 1978, issue, the first of many short stories she would publish there. It also became the first story in her first book, At the Bottom of the River, a collection of ten stories about childhood in the Caribbean. This writing experience taught Kincaid that the Caribbean and her mother would always be her true subjects.*

Kincaid married, had two children, moved to Vermont, and continued to write. She has published six books of autobiographical fiction and received numerous awards. Her work has attracted critical as well as popular success, as the writer's voice she found has changed and evolved.

Plot Summary

The story begins abruptly with words spoken by an unidentified voice. "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun. . . ." The voice continues offering instructions about how a woman should do her chores, and then about how she should behave: "on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are bent on becoming." At the end of the first third of the story, another voice, signaled by italics, responds, "*but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.*" This speaker is presumably the daughter of the main speaker. Without any reply to the daughter, and without missing a beat, the mother continues with her litany. She suggests how to hem a dress "and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming."

As the story progresses, the mother's tone becomes more insistent and more critical. The chores and behaviors are more directly related to a woman's duties to men, such as ironing a man's clothes. The mother again comes back to her earlier admonition: "this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming." The lines of advice are loosely grouped into sections of related lines. In a section that recognizes the powers of obeah, a mystical religion based on African beliefs, she cautions the daughter against taking appearances for granted, and explains how to make several medicines to cure disease, bring on an abortion, and catch a man. Finally she shows the daughter how to squeeze bread to tell whether it is fresh. For the second time, the daughter speaks: "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*" This time the mother replies to her daughter, "you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" With that, the story ends. There is no action, no exposition of any kind, and no hint of what happens to the characters after this conversation.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story *Girl,* by Jamaica Kincaid, is a dialogue between a mother and daughter, though the long and list-like form of the narrative implies that perhaps the guidance the mother is providing is actually a memory. The mother is the primary speaker, based on the volume of her comments, but it is clear that the daughter is the protagonist; the story is written in such a way that the reader responds along with daughter to the mother's comments, which take the form of a series of lessons; the point of the lessons, according to the mother, is to teach her daughter to behave properly and not to act, as she terms it, like a slut. Each series of orders concludes with a follow-up question or negative statement in which the mother shows her disapproval toward her daughter.

The first set of instructions concerns the proper method of washing clothes. The mother says that white clothes must be washed on Monday and put on the stone heap. Tuesday is for washing colored clothes, which must be put on a clothesline to dry. The mother goes on to tell her daughter not to walk in the sun without a hat or other covering for her head. She tells her to use hot sweet oil when she cooks pumpkin fritters and to soak her clothes after she takes them off. She instructs her to make herself a nice blouse when she buys cotton but to be sure that it doesn't have gum on it so it will hold up in the wash; she then shifts subjects completely to tell her daughter to soak codfish overnight before cooking it. Here, the mother stops herself to ask her daughter if it is really true that she sings benna in Sunday school. , She doesn't wait for an answer, though, and immediately goes on to tell her to eat food in a way that will not turn someone else's stomach. Then, returning to the subject of her previous question, she cautions that on Sundays the daughter must walk like a lady and stop singing benna in Sunday school. She tells her that her current walk is that of a slut, which she is obviously bent on becoming.

The next series of commands begins with a warning to not talk to wharf-rat boys, even if only to give directions. She tells her not to eat fruit on the street or else flies will follow her. The daughter comments back in defense, at this point, saying that she doesn't sing benna on Sundays and never in Sunday school. The mother continues with new statements that seem to imply that she is visibly showing her daughter how to do things. She shows her how to sew on a button, how to make a buttonhole for the button that has just been sewed on, and how to hem a dress when she sees a hem falling down. Again, the mother says that these instructions are all to keep her daughter from looking like the slut she is bent on becoming.

The mother continues to show her daughter how to do things. The next list includes instructions on how to iron her father's khaki shirt and pants so that they don't have creases and explains that okra must always be grown far from the house because okra trees harbor red ants. She tells her daughter that when she grows dasheen, she must give it plenty of water, or it will make her throat itch when she eats it. She shows her the

differentiations between sweeping a corner, the whole house, or the yard. This is followed by what the mother sees as necessary social skills, including the proper way to smile at someone she doesn't like much, at someone she doesn't like at all, and at someone she does like. Next is how to set the table for tea, dinner, for dinner with important guests, for lunch, and for breakfast. She tells her daughter how she should behave around men who don't know her well so that they won't recognize that she is bent on becoming a slut in spite of her mother's warnings.

In the next list, the mother tells her daughter to wash every day, even if it is with her own spit. She tells her not to squat down to play marbles, reminding her that she is not a boy. She cautions her not to pick people's flowers because she could catch something and tells her not to throw stones at blackbirds because the bird she throws stones at may not turn out to be a blackbird. The mother shows her daughter how to cook, how to make bread pudding, how to make doukana, and how to make pepper pot. She shows her how to make medicine for a cold and follows up with instructions on how to make medicine to cause miscarriage in the case of an unwanted pregnancy.

The mother shows her daughter how to catch a fish and how to throw back a fish she doesn't like so something bad won't fall on her. She shows her how to bully a man, how a man will bully her, and how to love a man. Regarding the last comment, the mother says that if her illustration of how to love a man doesn't work, there are other ways. She also adds that if none of the ways work, she shouldn't feel bad about giving up. She shows her how to spit in the air and move quickly so that it doesn't fall on her. She tells her how to make ends meet and finally tells her to always squeeze bread to make sure it is fresh. The daughter asks what to do if the baker won't let her feel the bread, and the mother responds by asking if, after all she has told her, she is "really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread."

Analysis

Girl was published in Jamaica Kincaid's first collection of short stories, "At the Bottom of the River." Although the story expresses a dialogue between a mother and a daughter, it is actually written as a narrative. This short, two and a half-page story invokes the style and rhythm of poetry. Likely highly personal for Kincaid, *Girl* is telling of the author's cultural upbringing and familial environment. It is clear by the given detail of each task that Kincaid must be taking some of these instructions from what was passed down to her. For example, a comment from the mother explains that okra must been grown far from the house because okra trees harbor red ants.

Kincaid's story is obviously set in a highly rural environment; this is evident in the mother's suggestions on self-sufficiency, such as teaching her daughter how to fish, cook and sew clothes. Similarly, the mother's fear of her daughter's unbecoming behavior and referrals to rumors she has heard about her daughter help suggest a close-knit community. Also revealing is the mother's comment on how to "make ends meet." We can infer the characters' social class from this instruction, and realize that the girl will struggle to survive, just as her mother did.

The mother's suggestions range from practical to nonsensical, and it seems that she is trying to mold her daughter in an exact way more than she is trying to offer helpful advice. Symbolically, the mother comes across as an exaggerated version of an overbearing parent. She takes on the role of solitary teacher, for although a father is mentioned, he has no voice in the instructions or the story.

The mother tells her daughter not to squat down to play marbles, implying that the daughter is still quite young. Comparing this statement with the mother's assumptions that her daughter is determined to become a slut makes the mother's comments all the more shocking. Of course, the ease with which the mother makes these statements implies that she is giving the same advice that she was given by her own mother. In this, lies the story's relevance, as it describes centuries of the stifling traditional roles assigned to women and passed down from generation to generation. By placing the story in a rural setting, Kincaid also grounds her characters in "the old way" of bringing girls up.

Allusions to love are curious in this story. The mother instructs her daughter on how to love a man, in this case likely referring to physical conduct. She says that if the method she teaches doesn't work, she has variations to offer, and that if the variations don't work, the daughter shouldn't feel bad about giving up. Juxtaposing these thoughts on love and sex against other instructions turns love into something mechanical, a notion that further hints at the roles of woman, especially in the past. The mother's explanation of love suggests that being a wife is just another form of work.

There is one evident use of foreshadowing in the story. As the mother's monologue takes her daughter through a list of instructions, she keeps warning her daughter to conduct herself so that others won't know that she is bent on becoming a slut. In the conclusion of the story, the daughter innocently asks what to do if a baker won't let her squeeze the bread to check it for freshness. The mother answers back in disbelief, asking her daughter if, after all she has taught her, she is really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread. In the mother's eyes, despite her assistance, her daughter will grow up to be a slut. She had already formed this notion at the beginning of the story, and it seems fitting that this is her ultimate conclusion. The mother's fear that her daughter will be labelled a slut helps to portray the limitations that society places on women. According to the mother, a seemingly innocent act such as singing the wrong song on a Sunday will condemn the girl to this negative label thereafter.

Characters

Daughter

The daughter is an adolescent or pre-adolescent girl in Antigua, learning from her mother how to be a proper woman. She speaks only twice in the story, voicing impulsive objections to her mother's accusations and warnings.

Mother

The mother is a woman in Antigua who understands a woman's "place." She lives in a culture that looks to both Christianity and obeah, an African- based religion, and that holds women in a position of subservience to men. She recites a catalog of advice and warnings to help her daughter learn all a woman should know. Many of her lines are practical pieces of advice about laundry, sewing, ironing, sweeping, and setting a table for different occasions. Other harsher admonitions warn the daughter against being careless with her sexuality, "so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming."

Themes

Mothers and Daughters

Like much of Kincaid's fiction, "Girl" is an examination of the relationship between the "girl" of the title and her mother. The mother's instruction to "soak your little cloths right after you take them off" refers to the cloths woman in many parts of the world use to absorb their menstrual flow and indicate that the girl is a young adolescent. Kincaid has said that all of her fiction is based on autobiography, and that her own relationship with her mother has been difficult since Kincaid was nine years old. In an interview with Selwyn R. Cudjoe she explains, "the fertile soil of my creative life is my mother. When I write, in some things I use my mother's voice, because I like my mother's voice. . . . I feel I would have no creative life or no real interest in art without my mother. It's really my 'fertile soil.'"

Nearly all of the text of "Girl" is the mother's words to the daughter. Although the mother does nearly all of the talking and there is no action or exposition, there is much that can be guessed about the relationship between the two. The mother is preparing the girl to take her rightful place as a daughter and then a wife, and teaches her how to do the chores expected of a woman. If the mother feels that the tasks allotted to a woman are demeaning or subservient, she does not say so, but neither does she describe the satisfactions of her life. She simply shares information about washing, sewing, ironing, gardening, cooking, and making medicine, trying to be objective and thorough. But there is a steady current of suspicion and fear lying under the surface, and the mother is unable to talk very long without something reminding her of the dangers of sex, and of "the slut you are so bent on becoming." When she thinks of sex, and of her daughter's supposed or real flirtation with it, her tone becomes colder, even angry.

The daughter's reaction to her mother's litany can only be imagined, because Kincaid does not reveal it. How would any young teen react to hearing such a long list of suggestions from one's mother? Twice the daughter interrupts with a defensive comment, both times beginning with the word "but." The first time, the mother does not respond, but simply goes on with her speech. The second time, near the end of the story, her growing anger causes her to irrationally hear the daughter's innocent question, "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*" as confirmation of her suspicions, that the girl is thinking about "sluttish" behavior, that she is going to become "the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread."

This conflict between mother and daughter is not unusual. Many mothers, because they know what their daughters may not know—that sexual promiscuity tends to hurt women more than it does men—grow angry and fearful at the thought of their daughters behaving recklessly. However, in this mother's entire long speech there is not a single gentle line, not one word of love or reassurance. The words the mother leaves out reveal as much about the relationship as what she includes.

Culture Clash

Although Kincaid herself has denied that she thought much about politics when she was writing *At the Bottom of the River*, Diane Simmons demonstrates that the wishes of the British colonial powers governing Antigua during Kincaid's youth stand behind many of the lessons of Kincaid's fictional mothers. "As the child in both *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* approaches puberty, the mother increasingly imitates the colonial educational system, which seems bent on erasing all that is native to the child, rewarding only that which imitates the European rulers". Thus, the mother suddenly institutes a number of programs to make a "young lady" out of her daughter.

Style

Point of View

"Girl" does not have a narrator in the conventional sense, because it does not have action in the conventional sense. There is no event, or series of events, acted out or told about by the characters or by a third-person narrator outside the action. Instead, the story is for the most part one speech delivered by the mother. The mother speaks in the first person referring to herself as "I" when she mentions "the slut I know you are so bent on becoming" and "the slut I have warned you against becoming." Far more important than the pronoun "I," however, is the pronoun "you." The mother directs her speech to her daughter, the "girl" of the title, and every instruction contains either the word "you" ("this is how you set a table for tea") or the implied "you" ("cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil").

In its handling of point of view, "Girl" is more like a type of lyric poetry called the dramatic monologue than it is like most short prose fiction. The dramatic monologue places one character in a dramatic situation and has her speak to a listener who can be identified but who does not speak herself. Through the words of the speaker, a personality and a conflict are revealed. Of course, "Girl" does have two lines spoken by the listener, the daughter. These lines, also spoken in the first person, move the story beyond pure dramatic monologue into the realm of fiction, where the exchange between the characters limited though it is becomes the central action.

As Moira Ferguson points out, however, the complete lack of exposition in the story opens up another possibility: "the entire section could be the daughter's own internal monologue. What if the daughter is simply imagining this oracular, maternal discourse, extrapolating certain worries expressed by the mother in day-to-day asides?" In that case, the words assumed to be the mother's would be memories of things she has said over time, not necessarily one long speech, and the italicized responses from the girl could be rehearsals for things she might say the next time the mother criticizes. Whether the mother is speaking or the girl is remembering, Kincaid uses the first-person point of view to create immediacy and tension; even with no description of people or places, the reader cannot help but visualize these two women and feel the charged atmosphere between them.

Setting

Although there are no descriptive passages in "Girl," there are several clues to the story's Caribbean setting in the mother's instructions. In the first lines, for example, the mother mentions putting laundry "on the stone heap" and "on the clothesline to dry," indicating a way of life without electrical appliances. Later, she tells "how you make ends meet," again indicating relative poverty. The foods she mentions help place the story in the Caribbean: pumpkin fritters, salt fish, okra, dasheen (also called taro, a

tropical starchy root), bread pudding, and pepper pot. Kincaid grew up on the island of Antigua, in a home without electricity or running water, and although she does not name the place, in her mind it is set there.

Historical Context

Antigua: British Colony

"Girl" was first published in *The New Yorker* magazine twelve years after Kincaid left Antigua for New York City. Even at that distance of time and space, Kincaid drew on her experiences growing up in Antigua for the setting and themes of "Girl," as she has done for the rest of her fiction. From the time Kincaid was born in 1949 until she left in 1966, Antigua was a colony of Great Britain. England had gained control of the island in 1667, after thirty years of fighting with the Carib Indians, who inhabited the island, and the Dutch and French, who wished to own it. In 1674 the first great sugarcane plantations were established, and slaves were brought in from Africa to do the work on them; the slaves were freed in 1834, and their descendants make up most of the population of the island. Antigua also became an important naval base for the British, and century, when battles between the British and the French for control of the New World waned.

Antigua under the British had a small, wealthy population of whites from Europe, and a large, poor black population descended from imported African slaves. The Carib Indian population had been eliminated. Like her peers, Kincaid attended schools based on the British educational system. The children were taught to speak "proper" English, studied British history, and read and memorized the works of British writers including William Wordsworth and John Milton. They did not learn about the Carib peoples, or about African or even Antiguan history. There were no books by Caribbean writers available.

As a young child Kincaid did not feel the effects of colonialism. In an interview with Donna Perry she comments, "the political situation became so normal that we no longer noticed it. The better people were English and that was life." But as she grew older she began to rebel, as she told Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "When I was nine, I refused to stand up at the refrain of 'God Save Our King.' I hat ed 'Rule, Britannia'; and I used to say we weren't Britons, we were slaves."

Because Antigua was so poor, it was easily dominated by Great Britain, and the economy grew worse in the 1960s when the international sugar market declined and Antigua was forced out of the business. However, in 1967, after Kincaid had left for New York, Antigua and another island, Barbuda, became one semi-independent "Associated State." They attained full independence from Great Britain on November 1, 1981.

Antigua: Daily Life

Although it is the wealthiest island in the Eastern Caribbean, Antigua is poor by North American standards, and was even poorer during the time of Kincaid's youth. Most families, like the mother and daughter in "Girl," grew most of their own fruits and vegetables and ate little meat beyond the fish they caught themselves. Foods mentioned in the story were typical: pumpkin fritters, doukona (a pudding made from

cornmeal, green bananas, coconut, sugar and spices), and pepper pot (a stew made from spinach-like greens and other vegetables, reheated each day with new ingredients added). Their homes did not have running water or electricity, and they treated illnesses with home-made medicines rather than with doctors and pharmacies.

Many Antiguans, especially the older generations, practice a woman-centered, African-based religion called obeah, similar to voodoo. Even those who are members of Christian churches will often practice obeah as well, using spells and secret medicines when the situation calls for them. Because objects may conceal spirits, believers in obeah do not trust appearances. This lies behind the mother's warning, "don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all." Kincaid's mother and grandmother practiced obeah, and the writer explained in an interview with Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "I was very interested in it; it was such an everyday part of my life, you see. I wore things, a little black sachet filled with things, in my undershirt. I was always having special baths. It was a complete part of my life for a very long time."

Critical Overview

Because "Girl" and several other Kincaid stories had first been published in the influential magazine *The New Yorker*, when Kincaid's collection *At the Bottom of the River* came out in 1983 it attracted more critical attention than volumes of short stories usually do, particularly for a writer's first book. Early reviewers were drawn to the language of the stories, though some were put off by the overall obscurity. Anne Tyler, writing for *The New Republic*, praised the stories for Kincaid's "care for language, joy in the sheer sound of words, and evocative power." Edith Milton, in *The New York Times Book Review*, also cited the language, "which is often beautifully simple, [and] also adopts a gospel-like seriousness, reverberating with biblical echoes and echoes of biblical echoes." Both writers commented briefly on "Girl" and its theme of the mother-daughter relationship, and David Leavitt, writing for *The Village Voice*, proclaimed, "The tangled love between child and mother, so clearly articulated in "Girl," is the major preoccupation of Kincaid's work."

Though impressed by the language and interested in the themes, early reviewers found the stories in *At the Bottom of the River* needlessly opaque. Tyler called them "often almost insultingly obscure." Milton wondered "if her imagery may perhaps be too personal and too peculiar to translate into any sort of sensible communication." Barney Bardsley warned in *New Statesman* that the book could be "irritatingly difficult to read unless you let yourself go." Ultimately, however, all of the national reviewers saw promise in the volume and recommended it.

Since that time, "Girl" has been selected for several important anthologies, including *Wayward Girls, Wicked Women: An Anthology of Stories* (1987), *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women* (1991), *Images of Women in Literature* (1991), and *Beyond Gender and Geography: American Women Writers* (1994). Most critical work on Kincaid has focused on her first novel, *Annie John*, considered a richer and more accessible examination of Kincaid's themes.

Kincaid's work has been the subject of two book-length studies, each published in 1994, and each of which analyzes "Girl" as an early articulation of her central concerns. Moira Ferguson's *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body* examines the personal and political conflicts in Kincaid's writing. She finds that in "Girl," "the mother-daughter relationship appears to be framed principally in terms of maternal-colonial power, mixed with probable rage and frustration in the daughter. A polyphony of messages fuses with conflicting reactions." Diane Simmons, author of *Jamaica Kincaid*, revisits the sound of Kincaid's language noticed by early reviewers and explains how "Girl" "may be read as a kind of primer in the manipulative art of rhythm and repetition." The mother's speech, she believes, "not only manipulates the girl into receptivity to the mother's condemning view but also teaches the art of manipulation."

One question that has interested readers of *At the Bottom of the River* from the beginning is the nature of the pieces. Though many critics have been content to call the pieces "stories," others have looked for a better term. Barney Bardsley claims, "This is

not a story. There is no linear progression, no neat plot. *At the Bottom of the River* is instead a beautiful chaos of images, murky and tactile, which hint at the dreams and nightmares involved as a girl shakes off her childhood." Tyler writes that "this book is more poetry than prose." David Leavitt calls them "prose pieces," and Moira Ferguson consistently calls them "sections." For Simmons they are "dreamlike stories" or "surrealistic short stories."

Kincaid herself has spoken about the voice in her first book. In an interview with Donna Perry she comments, "I can see that *At the Bottom of the River* was, for instance, a very non-angry, decent, civilized book, and it represents sort of this successful attempt by English people to make their version of a human being or their version of a person out of me. It amazes me now that I did that then. I would never write like that again, I don't think. I might go back to it, but I'm not very interested in that sort of expression any more."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, she discusses expectations and opportunities in "Girl."

In her 1984 *New York Times Book Review* piece about Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*, Edith Milton singles out "Girl" as " the most elegant and lucid piece of the collection," and observed that the mother's exhortations "define in a few paragraphs the expectations, the limitations, and the contents of an entire life." If this is an accurate assessment and I believe it is, what kind of life does it describe? What will the future hold for the girl is she follows her mother's suggestions?

Many of the instructions give purely practical advice for doing daily chores in a developing nation where running water and electricity are not common. Even in a society where people do not have many clothes, obtaining and maintaining them is hard work, and that work typically falls to women. "Girl" begins with laundry: "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline." Before the one-sentence story is done, the mother will come back to clothing many times, explaining how to buy fabric for a blouse, sew on a button and make a buttonhole, and hem a dress. And of course, women are also responsible for men's clothing, and the mother demonstrates "how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease" and "how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease."

Women are also providers of nourishment, and the mother explains how to grow and prepare different foods. In this family, the girl is expected to catch fish and to "soak salt fish overnight before you cook it." She learns to shop for bread, to grow okra and dasheen, a root vegetable, and to prepare pumpkin fritters, bread pudding, doukona (a cornmeal, banana and coconut pudding), and pepper pot, the staple of poor Caribbean families that involves reheating a large pot of greens with whatever fresh ingredients might be added on a given day. By preparing these humble dishes, a woman can "make ends meet."

The mother rounds out her list of womanly duties with guidance on cleaning ("this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard"), setting a table for any occasion, and making different kinds of "good medicine." In a culture where there is a lot of work to be done, it is important that everyone do a fair share, and this is a woman's share.

Just as important, though, is that the girl learn how to behave in front of other people, especially men. Several of the instructions have to do with how one appears to others, such as the command to "always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach." A woman must learn to hide her true self, her true feelings, and wear the mask that is right for the occasion: "this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely." Most of all, she must "try to walk like a lady and not like

the slut I know you are so bent on becoming." A woman may have thoughts of "sluttish behavior" (by which is meant, I suppose, acting as though she wants or enjoys sex), but "this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming."

Apparently the mother has learned to do all these things, and they are probably not beyond the girl's capacity either. But if she learns her lessons well, what will she have to look forward to, to be excited about? Where is the pleasure in this life? The litany of instructions in "Girl" is a far cry from the advice given to women in today's popular women's magazines, which suggest that taking long aromatherapy baths to regenerate will make one a better mother, or advocate "making time for yourself."

Just as important as the advice the mother gives in "Girl" is what she leaves out. The advice is practical, "how to make ends meet." There are no instructions for how to make beautiful things, or how to make oneself happy. The Caribbean is celebrated all around the world for its exuberant music, but the only reference to music in the story is to music that must not be made: "don't sing benna in Sunday school." Tourists travel great distances to Antigua to admire its beautiful flowers and birds. In "Girl," the mother refers to flowers only once: "don't pick people's flowers you might catch something." Her one mention of a bird is strangely cautionary: "don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all."

In an early essay in *The New Yorker*, Kincaid described the beauty of Antigua, and explained that Antiguans get up to begin their work very early in the morning, when the island is at its loveliest. In an interview, Kincaid remarked, "But it wasn't to admire any of these things that people got up so early. I had never, in all the time I lived there, heard anyone say, 'What a beautiful morning.' Once, just the way I read it in a book, I stretched and said to my mother, 'Oh, isn't it a really lovely morning?' She didn't reply to that at all." People who live in the midst of rare beauty, it would appear, lose their ability to notice it, to find pleasure in it. A child could be taught to observe and enjoy the natural world for its beauty and elegance, but this daughter will not learn it from this mother.

There are no tender words in the mother's litany. She does not use "dear" or any other terms of endearment, or even address the daughter by her name. She gives no advice about how to be a friend, or how to sense which women to confide in. There are no tips about changing a diaper or wiping a tear or nurturing a child in any way; she mentions children only when she shows "how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child." The relationship that concerns the mother is the relationship between a man and a woman. If she derives any pleasure or pride from her own experiences with parenthood, she does not reveal it here.

Finally, there are no words in the mother's speech about possibilities beyond home and family. She does not speak of school or books, nor of travel, nor of a career. She offers the daughter what she has to offer: a set of instructions for a successful life as the mother understands it and lives it. That Kincaid wanted more is evident. She left Antigua and found a different sort of life for herself, as she explained in an interview with Kay Bonetti in *The Missouri Review*, "I did not know what would happen to me. I was just

leaving, with great bitterness in my heart towards everyone I've ever known, but I could not have articulated why. I knew that I wanted something, but I did not know what. I knew I did not want convention. I wanted to risk something."

The story ends before we find out what happens to the girl. Does she heed all her mother's advice and become a competent homemaker? Does she follow Kincaid's lead and find something else? If she stays, is her life as joyless as her mother's? If she leaves, can she find a way to create a new family and a new home? What of the mother? If her life is as joyless as it seems, what sense of responsibility compels her to train her daughter for the same life? Kincaid might say that these questions and their answers are irrelevant, that she is revealing a truth about a moment and that should be enough. In an interview with Marilyn Snell in *Mother Jones*, she complains that Americans want pleasant solutions. "Americans find difficulty very hard to take. They are inevitably looking for a happy ending. Perversely, I will not give the happy ending. I think life is difficult and that's that."

Source: Cynthia Bily, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, with a specialization in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the use of language, the motherdaughter relationship and the significance of African cultural heritage in "Girl."

Critical Essay #3

Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" is the opening piece in a collection entitled *At the Bottom of the River*. Critics have noted that the use of language in "Girl," as well as in the other stories of this collection, is one of its most notable features. "Girl" is unusual in that it is a short story written in the "second person" voice, meaning that the narrator addresses the reader as "you." The narrator here is a mother giving advice to her daughter, who is the "you" in the story. Kincaid's use of language in this story is key to understanding the nature of the mother/daughter relationship which it conveys. Grammatically, the entire story is a single sentence, which reads like a list or string of statements made by the mother to her daughter. The use of repetition and rhythm renders the mother's words almost hypnotic. In her article "The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid," Diane Simmons explains that, "in the long, seemingly artless, listlike sentences, the reader is mesmerized into Kincaid's world." She goes on to say that "like the girl to whom the mother speaks, the reader is lulled and drawn in by the chant of motherly admonitions."

The central theme of "Girl," as in many of Kincaid's stories, is the mother/daughter relationship. An important element of the use of language in this story is the sense that the mother's "chant of information and advice" (as Simmons calls it) threatens to completely engulf the girl, leaving her no language with which to formulate her own sense of identity as separate from her mother. Simmons has pointed out that the use of rhythm and repetition in the mother's words "enfolds and ensnares the daughter, rendering the girl nearly helpless before the mother's transforming will." It is as if the mother's incantatory speech pattern is so all-enveloping that it prevents the daughter from asserting any individuality, opinion or will outside of the narrowly defined world of advice and warning her mother has created through her speech. In the two instances in which the girl does attempt to either question her mother's advice or defend herself against her mother's judgement, the rhythm and repetition of the mother's voice only works to overwhelm and engulf this meek voice of dissent.

The power of the mother's words to envelop the daughter within the strict confines of her own set of values and expectations is most apparent in terms of her references to sexuality. What is striking in this piece is the power of the mother's words to impose upon the girl a "sluttish" sexuality which must always be contained and hidden. The mother's "advice" comes in the form of a condemnation for behavior or tendencies the girl herself might not even have considered: "On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming." The power of this condemnation of the girl's sexuality, perhaps before it has even formed, comes in part from the way in which the mother integrates references to sexuality into advice on even the most mundane tasks: "this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming." The insistence of the mother's repetition of this condemnation gives it all the more power: "*this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming*."

The sense that this restricted definition of sexuality which the mother imposes upon the daughter is all-encompassing is most strongly emphasized in the closing lines. What begins as another mundane and harmless piece of advice "always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh" becomes, upon the daughter's questioning, yet again an opportunity to condemn the girl to the inevitability of becoming a "slut," despite all these warnings. When the daughter, with good reason, asks "but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?" the mother replies, "you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" As this closing line suggests, the mother's words create a world so all-encompassing that the daughter is unable to escape its judgements.

Critical Essay #4

A good portion of the "chant of information" the mother passes onto the daughter is made up of specific directions on how to carry out the domestic work for which the girl is clearly being trained. The mother's advice concerns such "woman's work" as washing clothes ("Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry"); sewing ("this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a button-hole for the button you have sewed on"); and cleaning house ("this is how to sweep the house; this is how to sweep the yard"), as well as setting the table, ironing and buying fabric. The use of repetition here is suggestive of the repetitive nature of the endless domestic chores which the girl seems condemned to spend her life performing: "this is how you set the table for tea; this is how you set the table for dinner; this is how you set the table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set the table for breakfast." The tedium implied by this simple repetition mimics the tedium and dullness of the domestic duties the girl is expected to take on.

In addition to the repetitive daily domestic work for which she is training her daughter, the mother also includes messages which assume a role of subservience to a man: "this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease." The messages which the mother gives her daughter about relationships with men also include warnings which suggest the potential for violence: "this is how you bully a man; this is how a man bullies you." The potential hazards of sexual relationships with men are also indicated in terms of reference to unwanted pregnancy: "this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it becomes a child." And, despite all the warnings about not being a "slut," the mother also instructs the girl in "how to love a man."

A simple instruction by the mother, toward the end of the story, is suggestive of her underlying motivation in passing on such specific instructions to her daughter. One of the items on her list of instruction is: "this is how to make ends meet." This statement by the mother in some ways clinches all of her previous statements. The underlying message which the mother imparts to her daughter, through all of these detailed instructions, is a message about how to survive as an African-Carribean woman in a harsh world with limited resources.

Critical Essay #5

The mother's litany of advice, warning, and condemnation in "Girl" also contains a string of confusing and contradictory messages about the daughter's relationship to her African heritage and culture. On the one hand, the mother insists on warning the daughter against integrating African folk culture into her Christian education. "Is it true you sing benna songs in Church?" the mother asks. As benna songs are African folk songs, the mother's question is designed to warn the daughter against maintaining cultural practices derived from her African heritage.

Yet, on the other hand, the mother's list of advice contains rich elements of this African heritage, which she clearly intends to pass on to her daughter. Thus, while warning against mixing African traditional songs with the Western practice of Christianity, the mother is sure to pass on information based on folk beliefs derived from African culture. As Helen Pyne Timothy explains, in her article "Adolescent Rebellion and Gender Relations in 'At the Bottom of the River' and *Annie John*," "when dealing with the real problems of life," the mother's advice "falls back on the belief in folk wisdom, myth, African systems of healing and bush medicine, the mysteries of good and evil spirits inhabiting the perceived world of nature." Thus, the mother's advice includes such folk beliefs as "don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all," or "this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you." She also includes references to folk medicines or remedies, such as "this is how to make a good medicine for a cold."

A rich African-Carribean cultural heritage is also passed on from mother to daughter through the importance of advice and directions concerning food preparation. These elements of the mother's litany add an important element of warmth and nurturing to her warnings and condemnations. Food preparation is described in cookbook style, matterof- fact detail, such as "cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil," and "soak salt fish over night before you cook it." Other references to food evoke strong sensory associations, such as "this is how to make bread pudding" and "this is how to make pepper pot." In these instances, the mother's insistence on conveying such an overwhelming "chant of information" to her daughter takes on a deeper significance in terms of the role of the motherdaughter relationship in the context of African- Carribean cultural heritage. In "Mothers and Daughters: Jamaica Kincaids' Pre-Oedipal Narrative," critic Roni Natov explains that, "Jamaica Kincaid's fiction focuses on the importance of continuity and community as they are preserved and kept alive by mothers, through their stories and through their connection with their daughters." In this way, the mother is maintaining an oral tradition whereby cultural traditions and survival skills are passed down from mother to daughter, and from generation to generation, by way of a rhythmic flow of words such as that conveyed in this story.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #6

In the following excerpt, Simmons discusses the mother's voice in "Girl," which she likens to a manipulative "chant."

Kincaid's "Girl" may be read as a kind of primer in the manipulative art of rhythm and repetition. The story begins with the mother's voice giving such simple, benevolent, and appropriately maternal advice as "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry." Like the girl to whom the mother speaks, the reader is lulled and drawn in by the chant of motherly admonitions, which go on to advise about how to dress for the hot sun, how to cook pumpkin fritters, how to buy cloth for a blouse, and how to prepare fish. Seduced in only a few lines, readers, like the listening girl, are caught unaware by an admonition which sounds like the previous, benevolent advice but has in fact suddenly veered in a new direction, uniting the contradictions of nurture and condemnation: ". . . always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming." As the brief, one-sentence story progresses, we come to see that the mother's speech, inviting with nurturing advice on the one hand and repelling with condemnatory characterization on the other, not only manipulates the girl into receptivity to the mother's condemning view, but also teaches the art of manipulation. The mother incorporates into her indictment of the girl's impending sluttishness the task of teaching her how to hide that condition: ". . . this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming." As the contradictions draw closer together—as nurture and manipulation become increasingly intertwined—the language seems to become even more rhythmic.

. . . this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how you behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming. . . .

In the last third of "Girl" the mother's voice continues the litany of domestic instruction, but added now is comment on a frighteningly contradictory world, one in which nothing is ever what it seems to be. The continued tone of motherly advice at first works to lighten the sinister nature of the information imparted and then, paradoxically, seems to make these disclosures even more frightening; eventually we see that, in a world in which a recipe for stew slides into a recipe for the death of a child, nothing is safe.

. . . don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a

good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you.

Source: Diane Simmons, "The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Summer, 1994, pp. 466-72.

Critical Essay #7

In the following excerpt, Abruna discusses Kincaid's use of dream visions and metaphor in her exploration of family life and social structure in the West Indies.

Some of the finest fiction from the West Indies has been written by Jamaica Kincaid. Her fiction, specifically her collection of short stories *At the Bottom of the River*, makes interesting use of dream visions and metaphor as the imaginative projections of family life and social structure in her West Indian society. In the short stories Kincaid explores the strong identification and rupture in the daughtermother relationship between the narrator and her mother. The process is mediated through metaphor and, when it is threatening, through surrealistic dream visions.

Each of these stories demonstrates tensions in the daughter-narrator resulting from a prolonged period of symbiosis between mother and child, especially because the mother views her daughter as a narcissistic extension of herself. In "Wingless," the narrator dreams the story as a mirror of her own situation and then imagines herself as a wingless pupa waiting for growth. The narrator uses a dream vision to mediate her sense of helplessness as a child dependent on her mother's care and attention.

In this dream, the mother is perceived to be powerful, even more potent than the male who attempts to intimidate and humiliate her. Because the narrator still views her mother as powerful, an incident of potential sexual violence becomes instead an easy victory for the mother:

I could see that he wore clothes made of tree bark and sticks in his ears. He said things to her and I couldn't make them out, but he said them so forcefully that drops of water sprang from his mouth. The woman I love put her hands over her ears, shielding herself from the things he said. . . . Then, instead of removing her cutlass from the folds of her big and beautiful skirt and cutting the man in two at the waist, she only smiled—a red, red smile—and like a fly he dropped dead.

The strong mother is a potential threat of death to those who confront her. But there is also a wonderful parable here of the integrity of the woman who shields herself from assault by refusing to listen to the tree-satyr who is trying to assert his power over her.

The story that best demonstrates the daughter's ambivalent relationship with her mother is "Girl." The voice is the girl's repeating a series of the mother's admonitions:

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry . . . on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming . . . this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming . . . this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming.

The first of the mother's many rules concerns housekeeping. Unlike the girl's father, who can lounge at the circus eating blood sausage and drinking ginger beer, the woman is restricted to household duties. The many rules, which make the father's circus-going a female impossibility, are experienced by the narrator as unnecessarily restrictive and hostile. The mother's aggression is clear in the warnings of the price a girl will pay for ignoring her mother's advice. The penalty is ostracism—one must become a slut, a fate for which the mother is ironically preparing the daughter. The mother's obsessive refrain indicates hostility toward her adolescent daughter, activated when the growing daughter is no longer an extension of the self but a young woman who engenders in the older woman feelings of competition and anger at losing control of her child. Her anger may also result from the pressures felt by every woman in the community to fulfill the restrictive roles created for women. Of the ten stories in the collection, "Girl" is the only one told as interior monologue rather than as dream and thus seems to be the least distorted vision. The ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship is presented here in its most direct form. The reasons for their mutual distrust are very clearly stated: resentment, envy, anger, love.

Source: Laura Niesen Abruna, "Twentieth-Century Women Writers from the English-Speaking Caribbean," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Spring, 1988, pp. 85-96.

Adaptations

"Girl" is available on audiotape, read by the author. The tape, produced in 1991 by the American Audio Prose Library, is titled *Jamaica Kincaid Reading Annie John (The Red Girl), At the Bottom of the River ("Girl" and "My Mother"), Lucy (Excerpts).*

Topics for Further Study

Find some examples of poems that are considered dramatic monologues. Examples include "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot. Do you think "Girl" is more like a poem or like a story?

Investigate the history of African slaves and their descendants in the Caribbean. Compare your findings with what you know about the descendants of slaves in the United States.

Research the training young women received in the United States in the 1950s, in popular magazines, advice columns, and how-to books. How do the expectations and responsibilities of these young women compare with those of the daughter in "Girl"? How do they compare with the expectations and responsibilities of young American women today?

Read Kincaid's first novel, *Annie John.* Some critics have suggested that the novel is in some ways an expanded version of "Girl." Do you agree?

Find recipes for some of the food mentioned in "Girl" and attempt to prepare the using ingredients available locally. What might be learned about a group of people based on what they eat? What could outsiders guess about you from studying the foods you eat?

Compare and Contrast

1978: Antigua is a semi-independent "Associated State" under British domain, no longer a full colony, but not an independent nation.

1990s: Antigua, Barbuda, and the uninhabited island of Redonda make up the independent nation of Antigua and Barbuda.

1970s: The economy of Antigua is largely based on farming, particularly fruits, vegetables, cotton and livestock. Its former reliance on sugar production has ended abruptly and catastrophically in the 1960s.

1990s: The economy of Antigua is based on services, particularly tourism and off-shore banking.

1970: Approximately 41 percent of Antigua's population is fourteen years old or younger. Many adults leave the country, or die in middle age.

1995: Only 25 percent of the population is fourteen years old or younger. Adults are living longer, and staying in Antigua.

1974: Although Antigua is a small and poor island, it is densely populated. There are 70,000 people, with an average of 412 people per square mile.

1995: The population of Antigua has decreased to about 65,000 people, as many Antiguans have moved to the United States and elsewhere to escape poverty and to make a better life. The United States has 263 million people, with an average of 71 people per square mile.

What Do I Read Next?

Annie John (1983) is an episodic novel in eight parts by Jamaica Kincaid. Annie John, a young girl living on the island of Antigua in the Caribbean, endures a painful adolescence in which she both adores and hates her mother. As she matures she struggles to come to terms with her parents, her faith, her culture, and her sexuality.

At the Bottom of the River (1983) is Kincaid's first collection of short stories, and the collection in which "Girl" appears. Like "Girl," many of the ten stories about growing up in the Caribbean are told in dreamy, stream-of-consciousness prose.

Krik? Krak! (1996), by Edwidge Danticat, is a collection of nine short stories about women in Haiti. The stories are sad and beautiful, and the volume was a National Book Award finalist.

The Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories (1997) collects forty short stories ranging from pre-Columbian myths and legends to stories by Jean Rhys, V.S. Naipaul, Claude McKay and other major twentieth-century writers.

Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (1990) is edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In twenty-six essays, this collection traces the history of African-American women's writing in the United States. Works studied include prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Jamaica Kincaid: Modern Critical Views*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998.

Eleven essays of criticism and interpretation, particularly of Kincaid's work after *At the Bottom of the River*. Most of these essays were written for scholarly audiences.

Cudjoe, Selwyn R. *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, Wellesley, Mass.: Calaloux Publications, 1990.

Three dozen essays and interviews about the works and lives of English-speaking women Caribbean writers, as well as overviews of the writing by Spanish-, French-, and Dutch-speaking women. Two pieces explore Kincaid directly, and the others provide context for her work.

Dachner, Don, and Dene Dachner. *A Traveler's Guide to Caribbean History*, Sacramento: Travelers Press, 1997.

An accessible and sensitive overview of the region's historical development, written for the general reader.

Nasta, Shusheila, ed. *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

An examination of black women writers and their interpretations of myths of "motherhood." The first two sections of this essay collection are "Breaking the Silence: New Stories of Women and Mothers" and "Mothers/Daughters/Sisters?" Kincaid's fiction is discussed in the third section, "Absent and Adopted Mother(land)s."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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