What I Have Been Doing Lately Study Guide

What I Have Been Doing Lately by Jamaica Kincaid

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Introduction

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" was first published in the *Paris Review* in 1981. Kincaid included this piece in her first published book, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), which earned her the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. According to Leslie Garis in her *New York Times Magazine* article about Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* made Kincaid "an instant literary success." David Leavitt, in his review for the *Village Voice,* praised Kincaid for "her ability to articulate the internal workings of a potent imagination without sacrificing the rich details of the external world on which that imagination thrives."

Author Biography

Jamaica Kincaid was born on May 25, 1949 to Roderick Potter, a carpenter/cabinet maker, and Annie Richardson, a housewife. She grew up in poverty on the small West Indian Island of Antigua. Kincaid, whose given name is Elaine Potter Richardson, immigrated at the age of seventeen from her British-ruled 10-by-12-mile island home to New York, where she worked as an *au pair* for three years. While living in New York, she graduated from high school, studied photography at the New School for Social Research, and spent a little over a year at Franconia College in New Hampshire.

After various receptionist and secretarial positions, Kincaid began her career as a writer with an interview piece on Gloria Steinem for *Seventeen* magazine. In 1978, she was hired as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, where she worked until 1995. Kincaid currently lives in Vermont with her husband Allen Shawn, who is the son of the former editor of the *New Yorker*, and their two children, Annie and Harold.

Kincaid's first work *At the Bottom of the River,* which includes "What I Have Been Doing Lately" and other short prose pieces, was published in 1983 and received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. *At the Bottom of the River,* like most of Kincaid's subsequent work, is autobiographical and draws from her childhood in Antigua. Kincaid concludes that "the way I became a writer was that my mother wrote my life for me and told it to me. I can't help but think that it made me interested in the idea of myself as an object." It is not surprising that Kincaid's mother may have helped to shape her writing. Indeed, Kincaid's later pieces, *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), both explore the complexities of mother/daughter relationships. Although Kincaid says that she writes of mother/daughter relationships "because the fertile soil of [her] creative life is [her] mother," she treats the very personal and formative experience of colonialism in her work as well, specifically in *A Small Place* (1989).

Plot Summary

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" is an elliptical, almost surreal narrative that begins with the words, "What I have been doing lately," and proceeds to depict, in list-like form, a series of actions engaged in by the unidentified and nameless narrator. The narrator, summoned from bed by a ringing doorbell, opens the door to find no one there. After stepping outside and looking north and south, the narrator walks north, seeing the planet Venus in the sky, a monkey in a leafless tree, and finally an impassable body of water. After years pass, the narrator boards a boat, crosses the body of water, and continues along a straight path through a pasture, observing a dog and then a goat that each "looked the other way when it saw me coming." When the narrator turns to look at the path behind her, everything has changed: it has become hilly and the landscape is full of flowering trees. Turning to continue on, the narrator finds that a deep dark hole has opened up in the ground. Wondering what is at the bottom, she jumps in. Her fall makes her feel ill, and she begins to long for her loved ones. She decides to "reverse" herself and return to the surface.

The narrator continues to walk through "days and nights, rain and shine" until she sees a figure coming from the horizon that she believes to be her mother. The figure is not the narrator's mother, but it is a woman who knows the narrator. She asks what the narrator has been doing lately. After contemplating several nonsensical answers, the narrator repeats the events already recounted in the story, in some places adding events or details but often repeating her first account word for word. She concludes by describing herself coming upon a group of beautiful people having a picnic. After approaching the people, she discovers that the people and everything around her seem to be made of mud and she becomes sad, longing for home. Finally she decides, "I don't want to do this any more," and is back in her bed, "just before the doorbell rang."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" is part of author Jamaica Kincaid's first work, *At the Bottom of the River*, a collection of short stories first published in 1983.

This story, like the other works in *At the Bottom of the River*, is told in the first person. As the story begins, the narrator is lying in bed. In response to a ringing doorbell, the narrator runs downstairs to see who might be calling. Finding no one there, the narrator steps outside to find that it is either drizzling rain or the air is filled with a sort of damp dust; in either case, the narrator describes the taste of the air as being similar to government school ink.

Next, the narrator looks north and south before deciding to walk north. As the narrator walks, we learn the narrator is not wearing shoes.

The narrator then describes the various things seen along the way: the planet Venus, a monkey in a tree that has no leaves, and finally, a large body of water. Although the narrator wishes to cross this body of water, it is not possible because the narrator is unable to swim. The narrator also contemplates building a boat or a bridge but concludes that doing either would take many years.

Despite this, the narrator says years pass before the decision is made to cross the body of water in a rowboat. It is noon when the narrator reaches the other side of the water, and begins along the path that lies straight ahead. Along the way, the narrator sees a house with a dog sitting on the veranda, and a boy tossing a ball into the air. Both the dog and the boy look the other way when they see the narrator approaching.

The narrator continues to walk but cannot say for how long because there is no discomfort or fatigue. At one point, the narrator turns around to look once again at the ground already traveled and is startled to find that rather than the long, straight path that had once existed, there is nothing but hills. Tall flowering trees have replaced the boy throwing his ball. And, rather than the damp, misty air the narrator first encountered upon leaving the house, the sky is cloudless and seems to almost close enough to touch.

Turning back to continue along the path, the narrator encounters a deep, dark hole in the ground ahead. The narrator is not able to see very far into the hole and wonders what lies at its bottom. In order to get a better look, the narrator decided to jump into the hole. During the descent, the narrator sees words written on the sides of the hole, but because they appear to be written in a foreign language, is unable to read them.

The narrator continues to fall toward the bottom of the hole, but as the descent continues, an ill feeling develops as well as a longing for the people who remain at the

hole's surface. The narrator is able to reverse direction and return to the surface. Once safely to the top, the narrator commands the hole to close.

The narrator continues the journey. There is no mention of how much time pass passed, only the alternating of days and nights, rain and shine, light and darkness. The narrator remarks that neither pain nor thirst occur during the journey's duration.

The narrator looks to the horizon and makes a small joke before seeing a lone figure in the distance. The narrator initially believes the figure on the horizon is the narrator's mother, but soon realizes this is not the case. Nonetheless, the narrator is not frightened because the figure appears to be someone familiar.

The reader can assume that the figure, a woman, apparently knows the narrator, because she says, "It's you. And just what have you been doing lately?"

The narrator considers a few possible answers - most of them nonsensical, and even sarcastic - before reviewing the events that have already unfolded. We read again, how the narrator is roused from bed to answer the ring of the doorbell only to find that no one is at the door. We read about the air that is damp with either drizzle or dust and how the narrator begins walking north. As before, the narrator describes observing the planet Venus in the sky, and seeing a monkey sitting in a leave-less tree.

This time, however, there is a description of how the narrator threw four stones at the monkey and how the monkey moved out of the way of the first three stones before catching and throwing the fourth stone back to the narrator, causing a deep gash on the narrator's forehead that immediately healed.

The narrator next describes walking a long distance before encountering the large body of water, but this time, rather than waiting for years to finally row across, the narrator pays a fare to ride on a boat across the water.

Once on the other side, the narrator observes people having a picnic on the beach. The narrator describes these people as beautiful with black and shiny skin, shoes, hair and clothes, and who appear to be chatting and laughing. The narrator wants to be with these people and begins walking toward them, however, as the narrator draws closer, the laughter and chatting die out and the people on the beach transform from black and shiny to appearing as though they are made of black mud. The narrator looks at the sky that had earlier seemed to be within reach only to find that it had moved farther away.

Troubled by all that has gone on, the narrator decides to walk away. The narrator describes the walk as long and painful. Longing for comfort, the narrator speaks of going home, finding a freshly made bed and loved ones in the kitchen and of being in church hearing psalms being sung. Overwhelmingly saddened by these thoughts of home, the narrator decides to sit and rest before going back to bed, just as before, before the doorbell rang.

Analysis

What I Have Been Doing Lately is a short story told in the first person. The events that unfold throughout the story are told from the point of view of the nameless narrator. Although we are given no clues as to the narrator's gender, age, race or even geographic locale, the narrator is generally assumed a female child.

The only other significant character in the story is the woman the narrator encounters toward the end of the journey. Similar to the narrator, the woman is not given a name, but because the narrator first thought the woman might be her mother, we are given a general sense of her approximate age.

The fact that the story begins with the narrator lying in bed gives the impression that the sequence of events described following the ringing of the doorbell occurred a part of a dream. Indeed, the great distances the narrator effortlessly travels, the transformation of the long, straight path to hilly terrain with tall flowering trees, the rapid progression of time and particularly the free-fall into the hole, are all events that typically occur during dreams. Further support of this interpretation can be found in the fact that the narrator changes certain elements of the journey when recounting the events to the woman that appeared. While it is impossible to tell if the narrator changed some of the elements on purpose, the fact that description of the journey told to the woman is different in some aspects than the description originally offered is consistent with the experience many people have when trying to recall dreams.

Another school of thought draws parallels between the narrator's journey and her reluctant transformation from girlhood to womanhood. A number of items support this interpretation. First, after stepping from her home, the narrator looks north and south before choosing to move north. Because moving forward or upward are generally associated with traveling in a northerly direction, it can be said that the narrator's decision to go north is representative of her choice to proceed with her life. Similarly, the transformation of the long, straight path the narrator had traveled to a more hilly terrain can be symbolic of the challenges of adulthood.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for this interpretation comes from the sequence of events that occur when the narrator jumps into the hole that has opened before her to see what lies at the bottom. As she begins her descent, she sees writing on the hole's sides that she is unable to read. Becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the way the fall is making her feel, the narrator manages to reverse direction and return to the top of the hole before telling the hole, "you can close up now."

The narrator's curiosity about what lies at the bottom of the hole can be symbolic of her curiosity regarding her impending womanhood. Eager to find out what lies ahead, she decides to "jump in" only to find that the changes awaiting her were both uncomfortable and unfamiliar. The narrator's decision to reverse direction and commanding of the hole to close can be interpreted as her wish to remain a young girl.

Following this line of interpretation, the fact that the second version of the story differs from the original account can be symbolic of the narrator's emerging sense that she is, at least in some aspects, changing.

Following this line of interpretation, the beautiful people the narrator sees chatting and laughing on the beach that seem to transform into black mud can be her realization that her impending womanhood will likely not be as carefree and fun as her childhood had been.

Further support of this interpretation can be found toward the end of the story when the narrator longs to be home and find in the kitchen either "my mother or anyone else that I loved making me a custard". The description of being safely home and enjoying a treat of custard evokes an image of a child who still longs for, and indeed needs, the comfort of home and her loved ones.

Characters

Narrator

The narrator is the main character from whose perspective all of the events in the story unfold. While not identified by name, age, class, race, or even by a striking feature, the narrator is generally considered to be female. The only physically descriptive information the reader receives about the narrator is that her "shadow was small." The narrator's lack of a specific identity prevents the reader from definitively identifying her and thus allows for multiple interpretations of who the character is and what role she plays in the narrative. One reading of the narrator, offered by Diane Simmons in *Jamaica Kincaid,* is that she is a person forever caught in a "story of departure and loss" who "will never be the same as she was before she left." Bryant Mangum, in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook,* alleges that the narrator symbolizes humankind's fall from innocence into knowledge.

The woman

A symbol of motherhood, or the girl's passage to womanhood, the woman appears to the narrator after she "reverses" herself from her fall. She obviously knows the narrator because upon meeting her she greets her by saying "It's You." She is the catalyst that starts the story over again.

Themes

Reality vs. Fantasy

One of the most noticeable thematic elements in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is that of reality versus fantasy. The narration begins with the narrator in bed, which perhaps indicates that the story is a fantastical dream. Indeed, it contains many elements that support such an interpretation, including a landscape that changes as the narrator passes through it and the detail that years passed as the narrator waited on the banks of the body of water. The dreamlike quality of this story has been noticed by many of its reviewers.

Loss

Another strong theme in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is that of loss and longing. At the end of the story, the narrator wishes she were home, with her mother or anyone she loved. More clearly, she states, "I felt so sad." Earlier in the story, while she is falling into the hole, the narrator states: "Falling made me feel sick and I missed all the people I had loved." As the story seems to repeat itself, ending by starting over again at the beginning, the narrator's feelings of loss and sadness will return.

Mother

Mothers figure prominently in Kincaid's fiction, including "What I Have Been Doing Lately." There are several direct references to the narrator's mother within the text of the story. The narrator recounts that when the figure emerged from the horizon, she was sure it was her mother. Later in the story, she expressed the wish to find her mother, or someone else that she had loved, in her home cooking for her. In the text of the story that appears in *At the Bottom of the River,* the narrator also tells the woman she meets that she has "been listening carefully to [her] mother's words." All of these references imply that the theme of motherhood and that of mothering are important notions within this story.

Identity

Identity is another strong theme in "What I Have Been Doing Lately." The narrator's lack of a specific identity, or for that matter even a name, invites the reader to ask, "Who is this narrator?" The story also revolves around the mysterious identity of the woman who unexpectedly knows the narrator. The woman says, "It's you," yet the reader is not directly told who that "you" really is. Another question of identity involves the people on the beach. Their identities, as perceived by the narrator, change and thus who and what they really are remains a mystery to the reader. Although the topic of identity is not

discussed within the text, the story indirectly asks the reader to ponder this topic by mysteriously leaving all of the identities within the story unknown.

Style

Structure

Perhaps the most striking aspect of "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is its plot structure. Plot structure is the way that an author organizes and tells the events of a story. For instance, a story that unfolds in chronological order is an example of a linear plot structure. Kincaid employs a circular plot, which begins and ends at the same place, with the narrator in bed. The plot essentially covers the same material twice: first when the recounted events ostensibly happen to the narrator and then when she answers the woman who asks her what it is she has been doing lately.

Point of View

As the title indicates, "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is written from the first-person point of view. Kincaid constructs the story from the narrator's perspective, and thus uses "I" to present all of the story's events. This keeps the main focus of the story on the narrator. The reader is unable to see the world or know the thoughts of the few other people the narrator encounters. In fact, this I-centered narrative keeps the reader at a distance from the world the narrator explores and the people she encounters. While this point of view limits the reader's understanding of the thoughts of others, it does allow the reader to see inside the narrator's mind. For example, when the woman asks the narrator what she has been doing, the narrator considers giving a series of answers to which the reader is also privy.

Tone

Tone is understood to be the attitude the writer expresses toward the story through the use of language. The tone in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is one of almost impersonal disinterest and objectivity. The writer does not display any judgments or attitudes about the series of events she depicts. Instead, her language reflects a detachment from the bizarre events which she tells in simple, reportorial fashion.

Symbolism

The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction states that "a literary symbol can be anything in a story's setting, plot or characterization that suggests an abstract meaning to the reader in addition to its literal significance." Some examples of symbols in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" could be the big body of water, the monkey, the leafless trees, the planet Venus, the narrator's shoeless feet, the deep hole, or the bed to which she returns. In this story, the planet Venus literally represents the planet the narrator sees when she gazes into the sky; however, the reference to Venus may have other implied meanings. For example, the planet she sees could symbolize the Roman

goddess Venus (or Aphrodite in Greek mythology), the goddess of love and beauty. One recurring criticism of Kincaid is that her imagery and symbolism are so intensely personal that it is difficult for the reader to feel confident about the possible symbolic meanings of objects.

Setting

Moira Ferguson, in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body,* suggests that "What I Have Been Doing Lately" takes place on the island of Antigua during the 1950s. However, the text of the story does not place these events within any specific time periods or national boundaries. The story carries the reader through varied terrain - which may in fact exist only within a dream.

Genre

Placing "What I Have Been Doing Lately" within a specific literary movement or social context is difficult in that Kincaid has resisted being associated with any specific ideology, such as Modernism or Feminism. In an interview with Selwyn Cudjoe, Kincaid plainly states that she "can't bear to be in a group of any kind, or in the school of anything." Despite such statements, Kincaid has been studied by academics in terms of both feminist and Modernist tendencies. Cudjoe points out that Kincaid's work shares an "intensely personal" slant and inferiority that is found in feminist writings. Kincaid admits that Modernism, a literary movement known for breaking with established forms and traditions, convinced her to avoid writing works that realistically portray lives and events. Post-colonial literature is another literary movement in which Kincaid's work can be placed. As the term indicates, post-colonial literature emerged while nations began to assert their independence from colonial authority. The literature of previously colonized nations is known for addressing the effects of colonialism and ideas of identity as it is shaped by the system of colonialism.

Historical Context

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" does not allude to a specific time period, nor does it indicate in which nation it takes place; however, because it references "black and shiny" people in a coastal setting, it is not unlikely that this story, like most of Kincaid's work, is set in the West Indies. Moira Ferguson, in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body,* narrows this estimation much further by stating that *At the Bottom of the River,* in which "What I Have Been Doing Lately" appears, takes place "in Antigua during the 1950s." Kincaid lived as a British colonial subject until 1966, and as the majority of her work is autobiographical, it is perhaps appropriate to contextualize her writing within the historical and cultural framework of the colonial and post-colonial world of the West Indies.

According to *Islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean: A Regional Study* (Sandra W. Meditz and Dennis M. Hanratty, editors) Christopher Columbus sighted Antigua in 1493 during his second voyage; however, the island was not formally colonized until 1632 when it was claimed by the English. Except for a short period in 1966-67, when the French held Antigua, it remained a British possession until its independence in 1981. From the time of Kincaid's birth until she left Antigua, the island was consistently challenging colonial authority. During the years 1935-1960, there were political campaigns aimed at curtailing the colonial subjugation of the Antiguans. In her article about Kincaid in the *New York Times Magazine,* Leslie Garis notes that Kincaid became increasingly angry about the subservient role that Antiguans were forced to play with the British. In 1966, the year Kincaid left Antigua for the United States, Vere Cornwall Bird, Sr. went to London to discuss Antigua's desire for independence. A year later, Antigua became an associated state of Britain, meaning that, although it was internally autonomous, the island was still dependent upon Britain to handle its foreign affairs and defense matters. After a constitutional conference in December of 1980, the island was finally granted complete independence from the British crown and officially became the nation of Antigua.

In 1674, Sir Christopher Codrington established what was to have a lasting effect on Antigua's society and culture - the island's first sugar plantation. By 1679, half of the island population was composed of slaves imported from Africa's west coast. During colonial times, the descendants of these slaves made up the lower strata of Antigua's racially-determined social structure. On the other end of the spectrum were the plantation owners and political elites, who were all of European descent. According to Paget Henry in *Peripheral Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Antigua,* the years 1960-68 brought an "emergence of the formal dominance of the Afro-Caribbean cultural system" during which many Antiguans began to assert their own cultural identity, independent of colonial influence. Antigua's push for independence was greatly reflected in the literature, painting, sculpture, drama, and dance of these times. Notable here is that during these years Kincaid was a young woman who was also in the process of defining her identity. Leslie Garis's article for the *New York Times Magazine* notes that during these formative years Kincaid began to "detest everything British."

Years later, her work would likewise reflect a concern for identity and a distaste for colonial rule.

Another way of understanding the cultural context of Kincaid's work is to look at the other literature by women Caribbean authors writing in the postcolonial era. According to Laurence A. Breiner in *West Indian Literature,* the decade of the eighties ushered in an increasing number of works that were written by women and that addressed issues regarding women. The many points in common that Kincaid shares with these other writers locate her within this Caribbean cultural phenomenon. Renu Juneja, also in *West Indian Literature,* notes that "Caribbean women writers offer us female-centered narratives and poems with a preponderance of the first person and autobiographical modes." In general, the use of autobiography and the first person point of view in all post-colonial literatures has come to be understood as an attempt to reassert the female voice in literature and history. Although Kincaid stated that "literature teaches us about men and women," in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body* she acknowledges that the themes of identity and differentiation do permeate her work. Post-colonial Caribbean literature is also known for addressing and responding to the "dual colonization" of women. The term "dual colonization" refers to the double oppression of women during the colonial period; not only were they subjugated as colonial subjects, but they were deemed subservient by virtue of their gender as well. Kincaid alludes to colonialism in her works, and in *A Small Place,* she confronts it head on. In summary, Kincaid's writing fits within an emerging cultural identification process in which writers concerned their works with issues of both femininity and colonialism.

Critical Overview

Kincaid's style is perhaps one of the most applauded aspects of *At the Bottom of the River.* As Laurence Breiner noted in *West Indian Literature,* Kincaid "displayed prodigious technical virtuosity" in crafting *At the Bottom of the River.* Suzanne Freeman wrote in *Ms.* that "what Kincaid has to tell us, she tells . . . in a series of images that are as sweet and mysterious as the secrets that children whisper in your ear." Wendy Dutton, in *World Literature Today,* similarly stated Kincaid's use of language is "the magic of *At the Bottom of the River."* She commented that Kincaid's language is "as rhythmic and riddlesome as poetry." In the *Times Literary Supplement,* Ike Onwordi furthered this complement by stating that "Jamaica Kincaid uses language that is poetic without affectation. She has a deft eye for salient detail." Thulani Davis also noticed Kincaid's mastery of detail, and in an article for the *New York Times Book Review* stated that "Ms. Kincaid is a marvelous writer whose descriptions are richly detailed; her sentences turn and surprise even in the bare context she has created."

For some critics, Kincaid's writing is somewhat hard to understand. Suzanne Freeman, in her 1984 *Ms.* article, recognized that "not everyone is willing to decipher the secrets" of Kincaid's fiction. Edith Milton, in her review for the *New York Times Book Review,* questioned whether Kincaid's stories were "too personal and too peculiar to translate into any sort of sensible communication." Kincaid's work is consistently autobiographical; this may account for the intensely personal and sometimes oblique nature of her symbolism and imagery. Kincaid has disenchanted some of her critics with her unconventional, complex style and her intense portrayals of conflict within mother/daughter relationships. Since writing *At the Bottom of the River,* Kincaid has shifted to a more narrative, less abstract style, but she continues to treat the themes of colonial power, mother/daughter relationships, and the evolution from childhood to adulthood in her works.

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Kellett has taught Developmental Writing and tutored at the Fullerton Writing Center at California State University. She is currently working towards a Master of Arts in Comparative Literature, with an emphasis on Caribbean Literature. In the following essay, she attempts to decipher the meaning of Kincaid's "What I Have Been Doing Lately" by examining it "through the lens of alchemy."

After one quick read through of "What I Have Been Doing Lately," the average intelligent reader may be perplexed at best. What on earth could Kincaid mean by all of this? Such a response would not be rare, indeed some of those who have praised Kincaid's work have also noted that at times her stories tend to "move forward to a logic which is essentially private" (David Leavitt in the *Village Voice*). In her article "*At the Bottom of the River*: Journey of Mourning," Diane Simmons notes Edith Milton's perception that Kincaid's stories are at times "too personal and too peculiar to translate into any sort of sensible communication." What then can unlock Kincaid's seemingly private and privileged understanding of "What I Have Been Doing Lately?"

Critical Essay #2

Perhaps the first task in seeing "What I Have Been Doing Lately" from an alchemical perspective, is to establish it as a story about transformation and process. According to Terree Grabenhorst-Randall in *C. G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture,* alchemy was "the art of transformation." The goal of alchemy was to alter the composition of a substance in order to create an entirely new and pure substance. At first glance, it would seem obvious that "What I Have Been Doing Lately" concerns a process, in that it is possible that the narrator has been getting up to answer the doorbell several times before the story actually begins for the reader. The fact that she returns to bed two times after being there at the beginning of the story suggests that she is in fact in the process of repeating certain events and then returning to bed. How then can this story be seen as a transformation? Doesn't the narrator simply repeat the same story two times? Decidedly not. As Diane Simmons notes in *Jamaica Kincaid,* the narrator retells the events in the first half of the story the second time with "slight changes in language, and then significant changes in the action." Listing the monkey who becomes antagonistic and the way in which the narrator engages with the monkey during the second telling of the events, Simmons concludes that the narrator's "experiences are changing her and the story of self she is able to tell." Other transformations within the story include the sky, which once "seemed near," becomes "far away"; the "black and shiny-beautiful" people become unattractive; the straight path becomes hills and the "leafless trees" begin "flowering." One must wonder if these things are really transforming, or perhaps just the narrator is changing, and thus the way that she perceives things around her is changing as well. Whether it be of the narrator and/or her surroundings, a transformation is definitely occurring.

Like alchemy, which is a very process-oriented creative science, "What I Have Been Doing Lately" undertakes the notion of process as a means of articulating the transformation of the narrator's evolving identity. The cyclical nature of the narrative, or the mere fact that the story both begins and ends with the narrator in bed, suggests that, as Simmons points out, the narrator is "caught in an apparently endless cycle of departure and return." Yet as mentioned before, after returning to the bed in the middle of the story, the narrator and her experiences are no longer identical to the character and the version of the story we read in the first half of the narration. Thus suggesting that the character's identity and how she perceives herself in relationship to the world around her are evolving by means of a return and departure that not only circles (i.e. brings her repeatedly back to the same events), but perhaps spirals upwards. Interestingly, Carl Jung in "Introduction to the Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy," states that the process of development of a person's identity "proves on closer inspection to be a cycle or a spiral." Indeed, upon such a close inspection, we can see that the narrator of "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is caught in a cycle that is spiraling her upwards, or "north," to a new identity. If the narrator were not changing, she would be forever repeating the exact same story. Instead however, she tells an altered story by returning to the same places, but on a changed, and thus new level. Read as a symbolic representation of the narrator's psychological development, the

story becomes like the alchemical *vas,* or the vessel within which the alchemical process is taking place. Indeed, it is within the confines of this short story that the narrator's identity is beginning to transform.

The "drizzle" that the narrator encounters upon first walking outside signals the reader that her identity is indeed under construction. In the alchemical stage called *Putrifactio* a vapor is produced which indicates that the materials have begun to change forms. Simmons notes that in Kincaid's novel *Annie John,* "dust-filled air" is used as a signal of change. Interestingly, the narrator encounters either a "drizzle" or a "damp dust" each time she leaves for her journey north. The presence of this moist vaporous substance suggests that the narrator, like the elements within the alchemical *vas,* is beginning to take on a new identity. The question then becomes, "what new identity is the narrator assuming?"

One perspective might be that she is moving closer to womanhood. Moira Ferguson notes that according to Gaston Bachelard in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter,* water is the most feminine and maternal of the alchemical elements. Therefore, the "big body of water" toward which the narrator walks can be seen to symbolize womanhood and/or motherhood. During the story's first cycle, the narrator takes "years" before she navigates through the water, or tries to enter into womanhood, perhaps suggesting that she is not yet at ease with becoming a woman. Literally, she at first can not conceive how she might pass through womanhood. Notably however, after arriving at the water the second time, she crosses it without hesitation, thus reflecting that she is now more comfortable, or more capable of navigating this stage of her journey into womanhood. Each time, the narrator reflects that the "water looked as if it had been a painting painted by a woman." Thus, even in her own mind, the narrator associates the water with the creative and formative energies of femininity.

The narrator's encounter with the monkey also plays a role in developing the idea that she is approaching womanhood. Before proceeding with this line of analysis, I will briefly define three alchemical terms to aid in the understanding of this connection. 1) The *Philosopher's Stone*—the goal of alchemy, or the end product of the alchemical process. For Jung, this goal was understood as self-realization. 2) Nigredo—the stage in the alchemical process during which the elements darken. This stage suggests "that something of import is about to take place." 3) Mercurius—in alchemical writings, Mercurius was understood to be the chemical element Mercury, the God Mercury (Hermes), the planet Mercury and/or the secret "transforming substance." Jung found many similarities between Mercurius, who was fond of "sly jokes and malicious pranks," and the image of the Trickster, who has often been portrayed in the arts as a monkey. Jung believed that "wherever and whenever [the Trickster] appears he brings the possibility of transforming the meaningless into the meaningful." (Definitions taken from *The Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* and *The Essential Jung*). To continue then, in both cycles of the story, the narrator's encounter with the monkey is either preceded by darkness, or an anticipation of darkness. Before the first encounter with the monkey, she says, "It must be almost morning," implying that she is walking in the still dark hours of the night. Prior to her second meeting with the monkey she says, "If the sun went out it would be eight minutes before I would know it." In both cases, the anticipation of

darkness or its presence parallels the darkening of the elements during *Nigredo,* thus signaling the reader that that which follows is significant. From the definitions above, we can figuratively understand the monkey as the "transformative substance" that converts the "meaningless into the meaningful." The narrator's encounter with the monkey becomes not just another experience, but an encounter that teaches us about the narrator. According to Jung in "Introduction to the Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy," the number four signifies "the feminine [and the] motherly." Interestingly, the monkey throws the *fourth* stone back at the narrator. If we understand the fourth stone as 1) the Philosopher's Stone, or self-realization, and 2) something feminine, then the fourth stone figuratively symbolizes the narrator's self-realization of womanhood. Once again however, we see that the narrator is not yet comfortable with this identification. She notes, "the skin on [her] forehead felt false," meaning that being marked or identified as a woman, even to herself, feels unnatural.

In *Complex/Archetype/Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung,* Jolande Jacobi notes that "the number four occupied a position of fundamental importance in the alchemists striving for the Philosopher's Stone." Similarly, in "What I Have Been Doing Lately," the symbolic association of the number four with the feminine world occupies a fundamental importance in understanding the narrator's self-identification process. Her reaction to her first encounter with the "big body of water," and her sense that her skin "felt false" indicate that although she is in the process of becoming a woman, she has not yet fully realized this identity. In addition, as Simmons suggests, "she will never be the same as before she left." Thus, the narrator is not a child as she was before, yet she is not entirely a woman either. Instead, the narrator is seemingly caught in the ambiguous space between childhood and womanhood. The complexities and obscure nature of "What I Have Been Doing Lately" reflect the fact that the narrator's identity is not yet defined and determinable. She, like her story, are in a constant state of change, and hence, to define the meaning of the story, or to define who exactly the narrator is, would be to limit the possibilities of all that either the story, or the narrator could become. It was perhaps to capture the fluidity of personal transformation that Kincaid wrote "What I Have Been Doing Lately" in such a complexly rich fashion. By simply stating that the narrator was becoming a woman, Kincaid would have deprived us of the experience of transforming that which at first seemed "meaningless into the meaningful."

Source: Dustie Kellett, "An Overview of 'What I Have Been Doing Lately'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

Strohmer has taught English at the University of Michigan and works as a freelance writer. In the following essay, she examines Kincaid's "What I Have Been Doing Lately" and contends that it is "a story about the power of storytelling to reveal truth."

Generalizing about Caribbean authors, Daryl Cumber Dance notes, "Language and identity are inseparable. The quest for identity is [a] prevalent concern in Caribbean literature." Perhaps because of this connection, many readers tend to examine Jamaica Kincaid's stories as semi-autobiographical texts. In the scholarly journals in which literary critics publish their work, articles on Kincaid are sometimes interviews rather than interpretations of her work; even in interpretive articles, Kincaid's biography becomes a reference point.

For example, in Moira Ferguson's book *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body,* Ferguson frequently refers to the facts of Kincaid's life to substantiate her arguments about Kincaid's stories. When Ferguson argues that "part child, part adolescent, the narrator [of *At the Bottom of the River*] comes to terms with a world that fuses fantasy, Eurocentric conceptions of the world, and day-to day events," she adds a footnote to support her point, noting that "biographical details from Jamaica Kincaid's life suggest that the [stories] take place when the speaker is around nine years old." In her discussion of Kincaid's book *Annie John*, Ferguson notes the parallels between Annie John's family and Kincaid's family, suggesting that at various points throughout *Annie John*, "Kincaid may be talking about her ancestry."

Criticism that relies frequently on details of the author's life is sometimes called *biographical criticism*. In biographical criticism, the author herself becomes a sort of text, which can be read and interpreted against an actual story. Knowing the facts of an author's life can often be useful when studying a story. For example, knowing about Kincaid's upbringing in colonial Antigua can help readers understand some of the social issues latent in her work; knowing she is a woman writer from a minority group allows readers to consider how her work differs from and interacts with the dominant culture.

Biographical criticism can sometimes be limiting, however. The danger is that the critic will examine the fiction to see how it creates the author, rather than the other way around. This is particularly true in semi-autobiographical stories like those of Kincaid, in which elements of her life are purposely woven into the text. In addition, biographical criticism of Kincaid has tended to lump her work together, seeing all her stories and books as connected, telling different parts of the same stories. This is not necessarily a bad way to look at her work, but particularly in the case of "What I Have Been Doing Lately," this approach offers an unnecessarily limited perspective.

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" was published in 1983 as a part of a collection of stories called *At the Bottom of the River.* Seven of the ten stories in the collection were first published separately in *The New Yorker*, where Kincaid worked as a journalist; another two were published for the first time in the 1983 collection. "What I Have Been

Doing Lately,"unlike all the other stories, was first published in the *Paris Review* in 1981. Notably, it is the only short story she ever published there, and one of the few that appeared outside of the *New Yorker*. Because it was initially published as a story separate from the others, outside of the context of her other work, "What I Have Been Doing Lately" seems almost to demand consideration on its own terms.

When examined apart from the rest of Kincaid's body of work, the story no longer *must* be about childhood. Although many critics have identified the narrator as a little girl, who perhaps represents Kincaid as a little girl, the narrator could be anyone—man or woman, adult or child. In the original version of the story, Kincaid does not include the phrase "dutiful daughter," which are the only words in the story that give any details about the narrator (and they tell us only that she is not a man). The narrator could be Kincaid herself, as an adult, or a fictional creation. Because the story lacks an identifiable narrator, its point of view is ambiguous. As readers, we cannot rely on the identity of the narrator to provide us with a framework for understanding this somewhat confusing and obscure tale.

As a result, we are thrust into the same position as the narrator. The narrator opens the door, steps outside, and begins a journey that he or she cannot comprehend, one in which every expectation is subverted: "Instead of the straight path, I saw hills. Instead of the green grass in a pasture, I saw tall flowering trees. I looked up and the sky was without clouds and seemed near as if it were the ceiling in my house." Similarly, we open the book, start reading, and begin a story that is difficult to comprehend because it doesn't meet our expectations for a story. We expect a narrator who will act as our guide to the story, but this narrator doesn't seem to understand the story either. We expect a beginning, a middle, and an end to a story, with a conflict to be resolved and a climax near the end. This story twice repeats itself, and it seems to end where it begins, suggesting that it might repeat itself indefinitely. Moreover, nothing happens; the story seems to be a dream or a series of the narrator's imaginings which conclude when he or she tires of them and resolve nothing.

Because the story subverts our expectations about stories, it calls attention to itself, requiring the reader to observe and consider even the way in which the story is put together. In a story that contains all the traditional elements of narrative—clearly stated protagonist (hero), antagonist (hero's enemy or obstacle), setting, and chronology—a reader can easily read right over the basic elements of how the story is told. In contrast, "What I Have Been Doing Lately" tells a story without using the basic tools of storytelling. By doing so, the very organization of the story suggests that there is more than one way to tell a story.

Kincaid's unexpected writing style in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" shares some characteristics of the style of writers in a literary movement referred to as *Modernism*. Modernist writers disrupted familiar forms such as linear time and plot, traditional grammar and syntax, and a bounded, coherent subject (or speaking narrator). Some scholars argue that Modernism was a response to the repressive nature of Victorian culture in the early twentieth century. The Modernist movement, which existed not only in literature but in all areas of culture, was seen by some as a rebellion against cultural

codes that limited freedom. Scholar Marianne DeKoven suggests that "the downfall of the old order, linked to the radical remaking of culture, was to be the downfall of class, gender, and racial (ethnic, religious) privilege." Although many think of Ernest Hemingway or poet Wallace Stevens as prominent examples of Modernist writers, such woman authors as Katherine Anne Porter and Ger-trude Stein, as well as several African American authors of the Harlem Renaissance, are better examples of the subversive nature of the Modernist movement.

Kincaid is too contemporary to be considered a part of the American Modernist movement of the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, her situation is similar. Writing as a woman of color from a colonial background, Kincaid tells her stories against the dominant tradition. Until recently, most widely read stories about the West Indies and West Indian people were written from the perspective of the dominant culture. As a post-colonial writer, Kincaid retells those stories from her own perspective, that of the native culture.

The two versions of the story in "What I Have Been Doing Lately" demonstrate that a single story can take more than one direction. Significantly, in between the two versions of the story, the narrator suggests even more storytelling possibilities: three times he or she introduces a possible story by saying "I could have said." With the repetition of what could be said, the story suggests that the number of stories that could be told are infinite, and that this story is only one of many. By doing so, it again calls attention to itself as a story—as a fiction—and as a particular perspective on events. It calls attention to the fact that every story is made by choosing to tell some things and not to tell others and by showing one perspective and therefore not showing others.

The second version of the story continues to open new possibilities. The narrator sees a group of people from two perspectives. First, the narrator finds them appealing: "I saw a lot of people sitting on the beach and having a picnic. They were the most beautiful people I had ever seen. Everything about them was black and shiny." But when the narrator gets closer, he or she has a new perspective: "[W]hen I got up close to them I saw that they weren't at a picnic and they weren't beautiful and they weren't chatting and laughing. All around me was black mud and the people all looked as if they had been made up out of the black mud."

By presenting these two versions of this part of the story, Kincaid makes the issue of perspective more complicated. It is relatively easy to pronounce that a story can be told from many perspectives. We often say "This is just my interpretation" or "That's just how I see it" as a way of defending our perspectives; if there are an infinite number of possibilities, then no one perspective can be right. In "What I Have Been Doing Lately," however, one perspective is clearly mistaken. The narrator did not intend to mislead with the first version of the story; it was a truthful and accurate report of how an event looked from a particular viewpoint. The problem is that viewpoint did not allow the narrator to see what was really happening. Paradoxically, in the midst of an ambiguous story in which it is difficult to see what is going on, and which celebrates the possibility of multiple perspectives, Kincaid affirms the existence and importance of truth. Ironically, Kincaid arrives at the affirmation of truth through a series of ever-shifting fictions.

From the perspective of biographical criticism, one valid interpretation of "What I Have Been Doing Lately" is that it is a story about growing up and moving from childhood to adolescence and adulthood in the Caribbean. From an equally valid but different perspective, however, it is also a story about the power of storytelling to reveal truth and about the very process of writing stories.

Source: Shaun Strohmer, "An Overview of 'What I Have Been Doing Lately'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Ferguson offers an interpretation of Kincaid's "What I Have Been Doing Lately," and claims that the story is "a discrete narrative about a child growing up in a world where psychological, physical, and political dominations seem the order of the day."

By her own admission, Jamaica Kincaid views her first publication, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), as the text of a repressed, indoctrinated subaltern subject: "I can see that *At the Bottom of the River* was, for instance, a very un-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." [Donna Perry, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, 1990.]

I want to argue that Jamaica Kincaid through diverse discussions of mothers sets up a subtle paradigm of colonialism that enables these repressions to be heard; the text, that is, masks and marks the role that colonialism plays in educating colonized people against their interests. For Kincaid herself, the project was a failure for the colonizers....

In "What I Have Been Doing Lately," the narrator muses scenarios aloud to voice herself into an indeterminate environment, both visionary and material. This meditation on infinite space links to her sense of loneliness, perhaps as compensation for the absent mother, perhaps a sign of the merger of two "mothers." The nature that surrounds her reminds her of that which never deserts her: "To love the *infinite* universe is to give a material meaning, an objective meaning, to the *infinity* of the love for a mother. To love a *solitary* place, when we are abandoned by everyone, is to compensate for a painful absence; it is a reminder for us of the one who never abandons" [Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination Matter*, 1942]. Dreams of the past and future merge with the present. Another evocative monkey tale erupts where the monkey (the narrator) avenges itself against its enemy. In its first manifestation, the monkey does nothing, as if lying in wait, living up to its trickster image. In both cases, the narrator is an agent, but the point where the narrator stops and the monkey starts slips out of reach. That monkey remains elusive as it does throughout Kincaid's texts, signifying simultaneously the ubiquity of resistance, non-complicity, and mimicry....

Each section of *At the Bottom of the River* is a discrete narrative about a child growing up in a world where psychological, physical, and political dominations seem the order of the day. Little escape exists outside the imagination. Collectively assembled yet chronologically unconnected, each section loosely features recurring thematic elements, many of them overlapping: a state of mind at a given time ("Holidays"); an apprehension of something that is massively compressed ("Girl"); plural versions of the same experience ("What Have"); a sense of ontological abyss ("Blackness"); desire and imagining ("My Mother"); vignettes of school and peers that disclose jealousy, fear, and despair ("Wingless"); an attempt to normalize experience while maintaining great

distance through a deliberate surface account ("Letter from Home"); a playing-out of oppositions between an inner and outer world, a mother-self dyad ("At Last"); self-reconciliation, self-knowledge, and an entry into light ("At the Bottom of the River").

Operating within an economy of loss (of the mother, of primal love), the narrator embarks on a reconstitution of her world; she constructs more fluid boundaries. On the one hand, she articulates a world of beauty and preoedipal bonding where image and sweet sensation rule; throughout the ten sections, she probes how "the onset of puberty creates the essential dialectic of adolescence - new possibilities and new dangers.". . .

Source: Moira Ferguson, "At the Bottom of the River: Mystical (De)coding" in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body,* University Press of Virginia, 1994 , pp. 7-40.

Critical Essay #5

Bryant Mangum is a member of the English Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. In the following excerpt, he discusses Kincaid's "What I Have Been Doing Lately," and asserts that it offers a variation on "the mythic story of the fall of man."

The reader interested in the philosophical vision that informs all of Kincaid's work must come to terms with the allegory in "At the Bottom of the River." At its most basic level the story affirms the fall of man from innocence into knowledge. Based simply on the fact that the narrator is able to return in her vision to the undivided world, the reader may Each section of 'At the infer that the knowledge of the prelapsarian world constantly lures the individual who feels its existence back into union with it....

The reality of the actual world in which people must live, of course, invariably intrudes on the remembered world of harmony as well as the dream world which attempts to recapture it and confronts Kincaid's narrators with truths that they have known and often tried to ignore: that people die; that they hurt each other; that they must be separated from people they love; that one must live in the world with the knowledge that he will die. In short, the narrators in the early stories are most often like the man on the threshold in the "At the Bottom of the River" allegory, and for this reason many of the stories offer variations on the mythic story of the fall of man. "What I Have Been Doing Lately," for instance, tells of a little girl who is lying in bed before the doorbell rings and who imagines two versions of a story to be told in response to the imagined question about what she has been doing lately. In both answers the girl tells of intentionally falling into a hole, in effect an acknowledgment, on her part, of the fall of man. In the hole there is writing that she cannot read, an indication that she does not know how to deal with the fall; and so she climbs back out, attempting to deny her knowledge. In one version she thinks of building a bridge or taking a boat across the sea, and she becomes sad. In another she throws a rock at a monkey three times and he throws it back. Both versions of the story underline the point that things are separate from each other: land from land and man from other creatures....

Story after story in *At the Bottom of the River* shows men and women in varying degrees of alienation from themselves, from each other, and from the wholeness and completeness that characterize the harmonious prelapsarian world....

Thus far, therefore, the allegory in "At the Bottom of the River" has provided two different kinds of vision. The first is that of the man who simply refuses to accept the burden of consciousness, an alternative that is not really an option for Kincaid's characters. The second is the one that most of them have chosen, or more accurately, inherited: that of living with the knowledge of their mortality and with the understanding that such things as beauty and joy are subject to destruction without warning, a fact which creates frustration and despair. And moreover, memories of wholeness and completeness compound the frustration. In the early stories Kincaid presents the human dilemma inherent in this second alternative in the form of verbal collages which show people existing between the world of harmony and that of lost oneness with nature....

Source: Bryant Mangum, "Jamaica Kincaid," in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook,* edited by Daryl Cumber Dance, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 255-63.

Adaptations

"What I Have Been Doing Lately" has been recorded by the Library of Congress Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature along with the other stories in *At the Bottom of the River.*

Topics for Further Study

How can colonization affect the literature of a region? More specifically, how might writers who have been colonial subjects use their art to address issues of colonization?

How does Kincaid's use of symbols contribute to or hinder your understanding of "What I Have Been Doing Lately"?

Contrast the version of "What I Have Been Doing Lately" that appeared in *The Paris Review* with that which appears in *At the Bottom of the River.* How are they different? Do these differences change your first impressions and/or understanding of the work?

Discuss the similarities between the issues raised by Jamaica Kincaid and other contemporary Caribbean and/or African writers.

Research Carl Jung's idea of "individuation" and his understanding of alchemical processes and reread "What I Have Been Doing Lately" to see what parallels can be drawn between the story and Jung's ideas about personality growth and development.

What Do I Read Next?

Annie John, also written by Jamaica Kincaid (1983), traces the story of a young girl's coming of age and her tumultuous relationship with her mother. The novel takes place on the island of Antigua, Kincaid's birthplace, and was one of the three finalists for the 1985 international Ritz Paris Hemingway Award.

Her True-True Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing from the Caribbean, provides an excellent introduction not only to the lives of thirty-one Caribbean authors, but to their fiction as well. This collection, which includes short stories and excerpts from longer pieces, was compiled and edited by Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, who is from Zimbabwe, has also written a girl's coming of age novel. *Nervous Conditions,* which was published in 1988, tells the story of many women and their lives under colonial rule. Alice Walker stated that *Nervous Conditions* "is an expression of liberation not to be missed."

The second edition (1995) of *West Indian Literature,* provides an overview of Caribbean literature and includes a section on contemporary women writers. Bruce King, the text's editor, has divided the book into two sections: Historical Survey and Significant Authors. The authors included in the second section are Jean Rhys, Edgar Mittelholzer, Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Earl Lovelace and Trevor Rhone.

Things Fall Apart (1959) by Chinua Achebe portrays life in the Igbo people of Nigeria. Particularly, it tells about the disintegration of their society under colonialism. This novel is often used as a sourcebook in Anthropology classes because of its cultural richness, and is understood by many to be Achebe's literary reaction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

Islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean: A Regional Study (1989), which was edited by Sandra Meditz and Dennis Hanratty for the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress introduces a general overview of West Indian history, culture, and society. It also provides specific chapters about Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, The Windward islands, Barbados, the Leeward islands, and the Northern islands. Each chapter is broken into the following topics: history, geography, politics, economic issues, health and welfare concerns, foreign relations, national security issues, and education.

Further Study

Cudjoe, Selwyn R. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview," *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference,* Edited by Selwyn R., Cudjoe, Editor, Calaloux Publications, 1990, pp. 215-32.

Discusses Kincaid's career, her dislike for colonialism, her name change, her parents, *Annie John,* the universality of her work, and how Kincaid does and does not fit into the feminist and modernist movements.

Freeman, Suzanne. "Three Short collections with a Difference," *Ms.,* January, 1984, pp. 15-16.

Freeman favorably reviews *At the Bottom of the River* and discusses Kincaid's ability to weave complex stories through her use of imagery and language.

Henry, Paget. *Peripheral Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Antigua,* Transaction Books, Inc., 1985, pp. 169-200.

Discusses Antigua from a political-science perspective. Three chapters concern the economy, the state and the cultural system of Antigua during the postcolonial period.

Juneja, Renu. "Contemporary Women Writers," in *West Indian Literature,* Second Edition, edited by Bruce King, Macmillan Education, 1995, pp. 89-101.

Outlines the preponderance of West Indian fiction written by women. Juneja discusses the plot of individual works and analyzes the way in which female authored texts fit into the greater themes of West Indian literature. She also discusses the unique contributions of women writers in the West Indian region.

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Review of *Annie John.*

Listfield, Emily. "Straight form the Heart," *Harper's Bazaar,* October, 1990.

Interview with Kincaid, who discusses her career and personal life. Listfield also reviews *Lucy.*

Meditz, Sandra W. and Dennis M. Hanratty, editors. *Islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean: A Regional Study,* Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1989, pp. 1-42, 431-54.

Provides a basic introduction to the Caribbean region with regard to its history, geography, politics, economic issues, health and welfare concerns, foreign relations, national security issues, and education systems.

Weathers, Diane. *Essence,* March, 1996, pp. 98, 100, and 132.

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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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