

JAMAICA KINCAID

“Girl” (Fiction)

Jamaica Kincaid’s novels, short stories, and nonfiction frequently reflect on race, colonialism, adolescence, gender, and the weight of family relationships and personal history. Born Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John’s, Antigua, in 1949, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid in 1973 partly to avoid a negative response from her family, who disapproved of her writing. She moved to New York City at 17 and worked as a nanny. She began college but dropped out to write for *Ingenué*, a teen magazine, as well as the *Village Voice*. In 1985, she became a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, where she worked until 1996. Her first published work of fiction, “Girl,” appeared in the magazine in 1978. Kincaid credits *New Yorker* editor William Shawn for “show[ing] me what my voice was. . . . He made me feel that what I thought, my inner life, my thoughts as I organized them, were important.” The author of *Annie John* (1985), *My Brother* (1997), *Among the Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas* (2005), and several other books, Kincaid is a professor at Claremont McKenna College.

Background on slavery and colonialism in the West Indies Europeans brought Africans to the Caribbean islands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to work as slaves, primarily on sugar plantations. In her nonfiction book *A Small Place*, Kincaid writes searingly of her native island’s dark colonial history, the “large ships filled up with human cargo.” The human beings, she says, were “forced to work under conditions that were cruel and inhuman, they were beaten, they were murdered, they were sold, their children were taken from them and these separations lasted forever. . . .” Although the British outlawed slavery in the 1830s, blacks remained the largest percentage of the population in the British Caribbean colonies. Antigua remained a British colony until 1981.

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; 1
wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry;
don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet
oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton
to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum on it,
because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight
before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna* in Sunday school?; 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 be-
coming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-
rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street — flies will
follow you; *but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school;*

* Eds. note — Form of popular music.

this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a button-hole for the button you have just sewed on; 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 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; this is how you grow okra — far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; 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 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; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles — you are not a boy, you know; 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 a 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; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; 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?

“ [T]his is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast. . . . ”

. . .

Reading Literature

1. Who is the speaker in the story? To whom is she speaking?
2. What do the speaker's remarks suggest about being female? Do the speaker's ideas correspond to your own ideas about being female? Explain.

* Eds. note — A spiced pudding.

3. Do you think this story has political or social implications? For example, what does the speaker's list suggest about the status of working-class women in the West Indies?

Journal Entry

Write a journal entry in which you record the duties of a woman (or a man) in your family.

Thematic Connections

- "What's in a Name?" (page 2)
- "My Mother Never Worked" (page 123)
- "I Want a Wife" (page 502)

Writing Assignments for Exemplification

1. Write a humorous essay about a ritual, ceremony, or celebration you experienced and the types of people who participated in it. Make a point about the event, and use the participants as examples to support your point.
2. Write an essay establishing that you are an optimistic (or pessimistic) person. Use examples to support your case.
3. If you could change three or four things at your school, what would they be? Use examples from your own experience to support your recommendations, and tie your recommendations together in your thesis statement.
4. **Working with Sources.** Write an essay discussing two or three of the greatest challenges facing the United States today. Refer to essays in this chapter, such as “Just Walk On By” (page 238), or to essays elsewhere in this book, such as “The Hidden Life of Garbage” (page 186), “Homeless” (page 510), or “On Dumpster Diving” (page 672). Make sure that you document any references to your sources and that you include a works-cited page. (See Chapter 18 for information on MLA documentation.)
5. Using your family and friends as examples, write an essay suggesting some of the positive or negative characteristics of Americans.
6. Write an essay presenting your formula for achieving success in college. You may, if you wish, talk about things such as scheduling time, maintaining a high energy level, and learning how to relax. Use examples from your own experience to make your point. You may wish to refer to “College Pressures” (page 448).
7. Write an exemplification essay discussing how cooperation has helped you achieve some important goal. Support your thesis with a single well-developed example.
8. Choose an event that you believe illustrates a less-than-admirable moment in your life. Then, write an essay explaining your feelings about it.
9. The popularity of the TV shows *American Idol* and *The Voice* has revealed once again Americans’ long-standing infatuation with music icons. Choose several pop groups or stars, old and new – such as Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Alicia Keys, 50 Cent, Beyoncé Knowles, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift, to name only a few – and use them to illustrate the characteristics that you think make pop stars so appealing.

Collaborative Activity for Exemplification

The following passage appeared in a handbook given to parents of entering students at a midwestern university: