

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl": A Marxist Reading

Something is missing from Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"—something very important for a short story, or any text wishing to call itself "fiction." "Girl" lacks plot. Plot can be defined as a series of events linked by causality. E. M. Forster came up with perhaps the simplest example: *The king died and then the queen died* versus *The king died and then the queen died out of grief*. The first sentence relates two events. There is no causal relationship between them given the language used (the word *and* is not a causal conjunction). The second sentence has the rudiments of plot. There is a causal relationship, as can be seen if the sentence is reworded: *The queen died because the king had died*.

By paying close attention to the various fields in the mother's monologue in "Girl," we discover that, instead of developing a plot, her dictums develop an ideology that prescribes and originates from labor (laundry, cooking, sewing, light farming, etc.). Her "how-to" formulations are interspersed with what can be termed *moral precepts* (appearing virtuous and behaving in a ladylike manner). In order to assume her place in society, the girl must learn how to perpetuate that societal role. The lessons and precepts the mother expounds, once absorbed, will increase her daughter's market value in the subsequent exchange of her body and labor for an acceptable place in society as wife/domestic. The girl's story, as the progression of the narrative evinces, will consist of nothing other than the series of activities in which her mother instructs her. In this way, the mother reproduces herself both biologically and socially in her daughter, thereby fulfilling her labor as a mother, just as she was produced by *her* mother. The reduction of both roles to the labor involved in the reproduction of one's position is made apparent in the lack of names; neither the mother nor her daughter (her replacement) are individualized in any way.

This prescription for production does not permit deviation. Deviation, as the mother's warnings suggest, would result in the girl being branded a "slut" or "the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread." She would have no place in the text her mother (re)produces—the social text of working-class domesticity. Neither mother nor daughter can escape the existing

social order. Whenever the possibility of deviance interrupts the production of the narrative, as when the girl interrupts her mother—twice—it is silenced and almost seamlessly incorporated into the text. Witness the mother’s references to her daughter’s supposed determination to be a slut, or her response, reestablishing the position of the wife/domestic, when the girl asks, “But what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?” Consider, moreover, the use of italics to denote the girl’s interjections: Her mother steadfastly proceeds with her diatribe—one that will surely straighten out the girl.

That the functionality and productivity of the mother’s lessons are not to be questioned is further demonstrated by the mother’s advice concerning men. Just as the mother teaches her daughter “how to catch a fish” and then “how to throw back a fish you don’t like,” she informs the girl about “how to love a man” as well as “how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child.” Every lesson the mother teaches is efficacious (the possibility that the girl does not catch a fish is inadmissible). In addition, the means of (re)production presented by the mother take into account undesirable contingencies (as when the machines in a factory produce defective goods). Hence, the mother also tells her daughter “if this doesn’t work there are other ways [to love a man], and if they don’t work don’t feel too bad about giving up”; such an outcome does not imply that the girl has not conceived, just that love, which is immaterial anyway, is not a product of the relationship.

Furthermore, in conveying the knowledge of “how to love a man” and how to “throw away a child,” the mother in effect shows her daughter how to be a slut without suffering the consequences (how to have sexual relations with a man—or many men—without becoming pregnant). This knowledge contradicts the mother’s injunction against behaving in an improper fashion. Neither the mother nor the daughter is aware of this contradiction, since it is just as unthinkable that the girl’s education would produce a slut as it is that a working-class woman would not be allowed near the bread. The resolution of problems and contradictions within the narrative through the persistent continuation of the mother’s diatribe represents the self-perpetuation of the ideology that keeps the working class in its place. If the problems and

contradictions that arise in the production of this ideology (the labor of the working class) can be solved by and subsumed in the ideology, then the ideology itself will not be identified as the real problem. Recognizing that the ideology *is* the problem requires a position external to the ideology—a perspective the ideology does not afford, of course. Consequently, there is nothing other than the expression of the ideology in the text, and the ideology is appropriately presented as coming from itself (the mother represents its foundation and its goals).

As such, the absence of plot in the story is more than a directionless narrative; it is the result of the girl's oppression. Such is the condition of the working class: It does not progress beyond the perpetuation of its own labor. The girl will go nowhere, within or beyond the narrative of what her work—her life—entails. She is without any means for social advancement; she will always need to “make ends meet.”