

Girl



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMAICA KINCAID

Jamaica Kincaid was born and raised in St. John's, the capital of Antigua and Barbuda. Her family was poor and, by her own admission, her mother did not like her very much. She left Antigua at sixteen to work as a nanny in New York City. She then moved briefly to New Hampshire to accept a photography scholarship, but returned to New York in the early-1970s. She took the pen name "Jamaica Kincaid" for anonymity and began writing for *The New Yorker*, first in its "Talk of the Town" column, then, as a short-story writer and essayist. She published her first story collection, *At the Bottom of the River*, in 1983. Her best-known work, *Annie John*, is a coming-of-age novel set in Antigua. Kincaid's work is noted for being autobiographical in nature, and for exploring themes related to family and gender. Some of her work deals more directly with the political and personal impacts of colonialism, such as *The Autobiography of My Mother: A Novel* and *A Small Place*. Kincaid is currently a professor of literature and creative writing at Claremont McKenna College.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Antigua and Barbuda declared independence from the United Kingdom in 1981—three years after the first publication of "Girl." The nation was among the last in the Caribbean to be granted independence during a wave of liberation that began in the 1960s. Kincaid's references to Sunday school and *benna* reflect a tension between Antigua's traditional British influences and Caribbean folk culture, as well as the persistent perception that the latter was incompatible with social propriety. The decade in which the story was published, the 1970s, was the height of the second-wave feminist movement. Though middle-class white women were the primary subjects of the movement, black women were vital participants and, with their counterparts, began to address the ways in which their lives had been predetermined and limited by gender. The Caribbean had no shortage of Black feminist writers who centered the lives and experiences of black women in their work, including Maryse Condé (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) and the Trinidadian-Canadian writer Marlene Nourbese Philip (*She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One of Kincaid's earliest literary influences was Charlotte Bronte. As a child, after reading *Jane Eyre*, Kincaid piled on layers of clothing and pretended that she was a nanny working

in Belgium, as Bronte had. As a result, Kincaid began to develop understandings of class, gender, and displacement that would later influence her work. Kincaid's career coincided with the developments of Postcolonial Studies and Postcolonial Literature. Postcolonial literature elevated the voices of formerly colonized subjects, encouraging them to write their own cultural and historical narratives. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was instrumental in exploring the histories of subjugation and cultural erasure in former colonies. Kincaid's interest in Anglophone Caribbean culture from a girl's perspective mirrors the work of Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff. Cliff introduced the character Clare Savage, inspired by her own experience of growing up as a light-skinned black woman in Jamaica, in her first novel, *Abeng* (1984), then reintroduced the character as an adult in the novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987). "Girl" was Kincaid's first attempt to write fiction from the second-person perspective. She repeated this technique in 1988 in her essay, *A Small Place*, in which she directed her narrative voice at a tourist viewing postcolonial Antigua for the first time.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Girl
- **When Written:** 1978
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** June 26, 1978 in *The New Yorker*; 1983 in *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid's first collection of short stories and reflections
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature; Postcolonial Caribbean Literature
- **Genre:** Short Fiction
- **Setting:** An unnamed Anglophone Caribbean island
- **Climax:** Mother asks the girl if she is "really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread."
- **Antagonist:** Mother
- **Point of View:** Second-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Life at The New Yorker. William Shawn, editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker*, invited Kincaid to write for the magazine in 1974 after an impromptu meeting facilitated by her friends, staff writers George Trow and Ian Frazier. "Girl" was her first work of fiction published in the magazine. Five years later, Kincaid married Shawn's son, the composer Allen Shawn.

Singing. Mother tells the girl not to sing *benna*, or calypso

music. Kincaid, too, enjoyed singing and had a brief stint as a back-up singer for one of Andy Warhol's "superstars," Holly Woodlawn. Kincaid never sang lead because, she insists, she cannot really sing.



PLOT SUMMARY

The speaker, whose voice is that of the titular girl's mother, begins her monologue with instructions on how to do laundry. According to mother there is a proper way and a proper day on which to wash whites ("on Monday" and "on the stone heap") and colors ("on Tuesday" and "on the clothesline to dry").

Mother also provides advice to the girl on how to maintain a proper appearance. She should not expose her "bare-head" to the sun and should be careful of how she walks, and she should also mind the length of her dress hems, to avoid appearing to be a "slut." It is especially important for the girl to be on her best behavior in Sunday school, where she is advised against singing benna.

The remainder of Mother's advice includes mundane lessons on personal hygiene, cooking, gardening, tailoring, and entertaining, but also more significant lessons on how to terminate a pregnancy, how to budget, how to love—presumably, a man—and how to tolerate the failure of love.

The story ends with Mother's insistence that the girl should always feel bread "to make sure it's fresh." The girl questions whether the baker would "let [her] feel the bread," which leads Mother to wonder if any of her advice matters since the girl will become "the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mother – The girl's mother is the main speaker in the story. Her authoritative voice, which offers the girl a list of guidelines on how to conduct herself, makes up the bulk of the story, with very few interruptions or protests coming from the girl. Mother tells the girl how to perform chores, how to cook and garden, what she ought to cook and garden, how to entertain, how to behave on Sundays, and how to love. Though readers are to understand that she is a Caribbean woman, her voice is not inflected by any particular dialect. Her tone is distant and impersonal, but grows more insistent when advising the girl against behaviors that could lead to her being viewed as a **slut**.

Girl – [Mother's daughter and the person toward whom Mother directs her advice. The girl is an adolescent, which compels her mother to offer her instructions on how to express her femininity and how to perform chores, alongside advice about](#)

[how to cope with difficult moments in life. The girl interrupts the monologue only twice to refute the accusation that she sings benna, and to bring up the possibility of not being allowed to feel the bread. Her voice enters the narrative to refute Mother's untrue accusation about her singing, and to question the assumption that Mother's advice will be applicable in every circumstance.](#)

MINOR CHARACTERS

Father – Mother's husband and the girl's father. Mother mentions him in the context of teaching the girl how to iron his khaki shirt and pants. Father represents the duties that women perform for men as homemakers. Mother's assumption is that the girl will one day iron her own husband's shirts.

TERMS

Bare-head – To go without wearing a head wrap. Head wraps are a common accessory worn by many Black Caribbean women. The wearing of head wraps is a tradition passed down from West African women who were brought to the islands as slaves. The wearing of head wraps is a symbol of feminine modesty, but it is also a way to avoid the exposure of kinky hair. **Mother** tells the **girl** not to go "bare-head in the hot sun" to prevent her hair, which was probably straightened, from curling due to the heat and humidity.

Benna – [a genre of calypso music native to Antigua and Barbuda. Benna is a folk music characterized by sexually suggestive lyrics, call-and-response, and local gossip. Mother does not want the girl to sing benna in Sunday school because it would be inappropriate, given the content of the music.](#)

Dasheen – [Most commonly known as taro, dasheen is a root vegetable popular in China, Japan, and the West Indies. The vegetable looks similar to a potato and can be fried, roasted, boiled, mashed, and grated. Its young leaves are also edible and can be steamed, boiled, or sautéed, like spinach.](#)

Doukona – [Also known as dokunoo, dokono, or dokunu in Jamaica, it is called kenkey in West Africa and konkee in Guyana. The dish is a pudding made from one of a variety of starch foods, such as cornmeal or cassava, plantain, or green banana. The starch is wrapped inside of a banana leaf and boiled.](#)

Pepper Pot – An Amerindian meat stew that is popular in Guyana and the Caribbean. The dish, which is seasoned with cinnamon, hot peppers and cassareep (a hot, black liquid made from cassava) is usually served on special occasions, such as Christmas. Beef is most commonly used as the meat, but mutton and pork are occasionally used instead.

Wharf-rat Boys – Taken from the name of a kind of brown rat, a wharf-rat is someone who loiters around ship-loading docks with the intent of stealing from ships, containers, or

warehouses. Mother's insistence that the **girl** never speak to wharf-rat boys is due to their criminal activity and low social status.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GENDER AND DOMESTICITY

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" opens with the speaker, Mother, instructing the eponymous girl, presumably her daughter, on how to perform

household chores. Though neither character ever addresses the other in a manner that would establish the parent-child relationship, the reader understands the nature of their bond, due to the main speaker's instructive and scolding voice, as well as the secondary speaker's interruptions to question the primary speaker's instructions. The instructions detail the routine tasks of managing a household—tasks which the girl must learn in her transition to womanhood. Kincaid includes these lessons, passed down from mother to daughter, to demonstrate the way in which a girl's life is predetermined by gender.

Two of the chores that a girl must learn are laundry and sewing. These responsibilities will ensure that her family is clean and presentable when they go out in public, placing her family's reputation squarely on her shoulders.

As part of the routine, Mother tells the girl that the laundry is to be done every Monday and Tuesday, with specific methods on how to wash whites and colors. Mother also instructs her on how to find the right cotton fabric for a nice blouse, and how to hem a dress when she notices that the hem is coming down. This advice communicates the expectation that the girl will grow up to dress with feminine modesty, and that she will be able to make and take care of her own clothes, establishing domesticity as both a cultivated art, key in ensuring a good quality of life, and a routine drudgery. Instructions on how to iron a crease in her father's khakis prepare the girl for the day when she will be ironing creases in her own husband's shirts and pants. This advice is juxtaposed with instructions on how to hem a dress so that the girl will not look "like the **slut** I know you are so bent on becoming." With the juxtaposition of these pieces of advice, Mother simultaneously expresses the expectation that her daughter will dress according to gender norms, and that she will maintain enough modesty to find herself a husband.

In the same way that the girl will be expected to look after her

own appearance and that of her husband, she must also maintain the integrity of the interior of her home and its surrounds. Mother's instructions to her daughter on how to manage both interior and exterior domestic space show how women are expected to understand the natural world as well as they do their own homes. Mother shows the girl how to grow okra, but stresses the importance of cultivating it "far from the house," because the tree "harbors red ants." When growing dasheen, it is important to make sure that it gets enough water so that, when eaten, it will not cause the throat to itch. By ensuring the integrity of the garden, she also ensures the integrity of the home, keeping out pests and yielding good crops.

Learning how to sweep is another aspect of maintaining the integrity of interior and exterior domestic spaces. Mother tells her daughter how to sweep "a corner," how to sweep "a whole house," and how to "sweep a yard." Women are responsible for eliminating dirt and messiness wherever they find it—even in the smallest spaces—or they risk being regarded as poor housekeepers.

In the monologue, the list of chores (which is meticulous) is designed to make the girl's life easier—to tell her what she will need to know to keep her own house in order. However, the list is also constricting because it outlines a particular way to go about one's household duties. Through instruction, Mother makes it clear that the ability to perform these duties will determine the girl's worth as a woman. Thus, mother's advice is both helpful and limiting. It encourages self-sufficiency, but also makes a woman dependent on her family and her home to give her a sense of purpose and value.



AUTHENTICITY AND FEMININITY

To be "feminine" often means to embrace modesty, and to privilege good manners over honesty. The girl learns that a woman must be careful not to

show too much of her body and not to talk to the wrong kinds of boys. She must know how to be friendly without being too friendly, and certainly not to the wrong people or at the wrong time. She must know how to eat without making it too obvious. She must also know which activities are permitted to her in public and which are not. Being a proper, feminine woman, according to Mother, means knowing the boundaries that a woman imposes on her self-expression so that she does not risk being misunderstood or maligned. However, those boundaries also disallow the genuine expression of the girl's identity. Mother's instructions, therefore, expose a tension between the expectations of femininity and the desire to be authentic.

One example of a disjunction between authenticity and appearance comes when Mother teaches the girl how to smile. Mother explains that there are different smiles for people she does not like very much, people she does not like at all, and for people whom she likes "completely." This suggests to the girl

that politeness means never revealing her true feelings about anyone, while it also limits the number of expressions and emotions that are available to the girl by mandating a smile (albeit different types of smiles) at all times. From this lesson, the girl is to understand that it is more important for women to be nice than to be authentic. It also suggests that other people's perceptions matter more than her feelings.

Mother elevates social norms over authenticity. Her statement, "this is how to love a man," reinforces the implicit understanding that homosexuality is not an option for the girl, and the phrase "this is how" asserts that there are rigid norms that dictate how she should experience love. Instead of discovering her own ways of loving, Mother tells the girl to try a prescribed set of methods, and if those don't work Mother says that she should give up rather than figuring out what pleases her. This advice also intimates that the conventional ways of loving a man are just as—if not more important—than the feeling. In addition, Mother tells her daughter "how to bully a man" and shows her "how a man bullies you," enforcing the understanding that relations between the sexes are borne from conflict, though still with set rules for each to follow.

Overall, Mother's advice implicitly tells the girl that her value lies in her ability to properly present herself, rather than in discovering and honoring who she really is. In Mother's conception of femininity, being a woman requires the denial of aspects of human existence, such as getting dirty or expressing one's true feelings. Femininity, the girl learns, requires repression and masking. Black femininity, specifically, requires the girl to embrace her identity in the right ways—she may wear a headwrap, for instance, but she may not expose her kinky-curly hair. She may sing benna, but not in Sunday school, which follows the more solemn rules of European churches. She may love, but she must love a man. To be feminine, or to be a "lady," is to know these standards and to live by them, regardless of what the girl would like to do.



SEXUALITY

In "Girl," Mother's instructions are peppered with constant warnings and accusations about the girl becoming a **slut**. Ironically, this is never in the context of sex or promiscuity—instead, the behaviors that Mother suggests will lead to the girl becoming a slut are distinctly non-sexual, while her actual mentions of sexuality are relatively nonjudgmental. Although being a "slut" is apparently the worst thing that the girl could become, Mother does not shy away from giving her daughter pragmatic advice about sex itself; instead, she uses the word "slut" as a way to infuse everyday social transgressions or mistakes with the taint of sexuality, thereby making the girl afraid of falling short publicly in any way because of the shame it will bring her reputation.

The everyday behaviors that Mother insists will make the girl a "slut" are notable in that they concern reputation and public

appearance rather than sexuality. For example, Mother instructs the girl to "walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming," to "hem a dress when you see the hem coming down," and to behave in certain ways "in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't immediately recognize the slut I have warned you against becoming." Having a loose hem, walking the wrong way, or behaving improperly around strangers are behaviors that others would notice and that might negatively affect the girl's reputation. In other words, such behaviors might invite nasty gossip, and, as a woman, the girl's reputation is one of her only means of achieving respect or advancement. By framing these behaviors as sexual impropriety, rather than as a simple lapse in manners or an expression of individual personality, Mother teaches the girl to be afraid of the shame that her public presentation might invite.

Ironically, though, Mother is not categorically against sex, and when she discusses sex, she does so relatively pragmatically and nonjudgmentally. For example, as part of teaching the girl recipes for traditional dishes and medicines, she tells the girl how to make a medicine to induce an abortion. She breezes right past this, placing it alongside other non-sexual recipes: "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 suggests that inducing an abortion is as normal an act as making dinner or treating a cold, which indicates that actual sex acts—so long as they're not publicly known (and this medicine might be used to *prevent* them from being publicly known)—are normal.

Furthermore, Mother specifically explains sex to her daughter, saying "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 explanation is pragmatic and not loaded with the shameful and accusatory language Mother uses when telling her daughter not to do anything in public that might make her seem like a "slut." Instead, as Mother actually explains sex to her daughter, she seems somewhat bewildered by it, giving what seems to be a formulaic explanation of sex and lacking ideas about sexuality beyond a few methods. This suggests that while female pleasure is perhaps not broadly understood or prioritized, sex is not something that is to be avoided. Therefore, Mother's advice suggests that the propriety of sexuality hinges on privacy. While any aspect of the girl's daily life in which she publicly falls short will be read through the lens of sexual impropriety, if the girl expresses her sexuality in private, her actions are normal, the consequences can be dealt with, and she should know what to do.



CARIBBEAN CULTURE AND TRADITION

Part of the girl's schooling in femininity involves learning the traditions of her West Indian culture:

recipes, gardening advice, superstitions, and rules of propriety and self-presentation. "Girl" was published during the liberation of numerous Caribbean islands from European colonial powers and during the development of Postcolonial Studies. While many former colonial subjects were told by their colonizers that their culture was not important and that they lacked the authority to speak and write their own cultural narratives, Kincaid depicts the traditions in "Girl," not only to evoke the unique character of the Caribbean, but also to assert the value of customs that developed—not because of colonial rule—but, in spite of it.

Food is perhaps the most important part of Caribbean tradition in the story. Mother teaches the girl how to cook pumpkin fritters and how to "soak salt fish overnight" before cooking it. Mother also introduces a list of foods—doukona, pepper pot, and bread pudding—which demonstrate their culinary traditions and native foods. Mother's instructions on how to cook prepare the girl for being a homemaker, but they also connect the girl to the foods that nourished and sustained those who came before her. Thus, the recipes are an intergenerational link between ancestors, mother and daughter, and future generations.

In addition to food recipes, Mother also instructs the girl on how to prepare a concoction for inducing a miscarriage, or "a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child." Slavery and colonialism made black women the frequent victims of rape. Potions to terminate pregnancies were one of the few ways in which women could have some control over their own bodies. Her description of this recipe, as well as a recipe for a "good medicine for a cold," indicates that remedies are passed down, not only to help women learn how to nourish and care for their families, but also to help them learn self-care. They are examples, too, of the resilience and creativity of Black Caribbean women who had to provide their own healthcare, particularly during slavery.

Just as the recipes in the story are derived from Caribbean folk wisdom and tradition, so are the superstitions and proverbs that Mother includes in her advice. Mother uses some of these proverbs and superstitions to offer moral lessons. For example, she mentions that the temptation to pick someone's flowers can lead you to "catch something"—this admonition is not merely a warning to avoid strange gardens, but also probably subtle advice to avoid relationships with men who are romantically-involved with other women. The warning not to "throw stones at blackbirds," for they might not be blackbirds at all, is a lesson on not judging everything by appearances.

Mother also intersperses her speech with proverbs that are not unique to Caribbean culture, such as throwing back an undesirable fish so that "something bad won't fall on you" and "how to spit up in the air if you feel like it" and move quickly out of the way "so that it doesn't fall on you." This is a variation on the traditional adage, "Don't spit in the air, it will fall on you"—an

expression designed to discourage self-defeatist behavior. The inclusion of these adages, which would be known to a wider audience, offsets the more culturally specific proverbs. They also remind readers that the Caribbean islands, which are defined by their relative smallness and their subordinate relationships to more powerful countries, have a unique history, but have also been influenced by cultural exchange. Mother's revision of the "Don't spit in the air" proverb is exemplary of the way in which Caribbean people can take an ordinary proverb and make it specific to their own culture.

Mother's lessons on Caribbean culture illustrate the ways in which women have expressed creativity and agency, despite the oppressive histories of slavery and colonialism. The generational wisdom emphasizes responsibility, but also accepts that women can be vulnerable and flawed.



CLASS

Like femininity and race, class is a key factor in determining what the girl's life will be and what will be expected of her. Kincaid never directly tells the reader that the girl is middle-class, but she implies through the advice that Mother gives that the family is middle-class and that maintaining this status is of vital importance to the girl's future. As with other aspects of her identity, the girl's class background determines what she can and cannot do, constricting her ability to express herself and suggesting that she should not do things that are outside the strict norms of her social class.

Mother draws distinctions between the different types of men that the girl will encounter, and her distinctions are subtly class-based. Kincaid does not identify anyone specifically as lower-class or within the same class, but she delineates who they are based on how they ought to be treated.

For example, Mother forbids the girl from talking to the "wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions." The specific instructions not to talk to these boys, even if they need help, suggests that they are unworthy of acknowledgement. Due to both poverty and their possible engagement in criminal activity, any association with them would risk being perceived as unclean or un-ladylike and would threaten the stability of the girl's class position.

Mother's instructions on how to entertain are also based on middle-class standards and values, and seem explicitly designed to ensure that the girl's class status is clear to others. The girl should know how to set a table for breakfast and lunch, as well as how to prepare "dinner with an important guest," and "set a table for tea." Knowing how to set tables for several meals and occasions indicates, not only adherence to table manners (a possible class marker), but also the expectation that she will own certain items, such as a tea set and silverware, which would not be available to a poor woman.

However, Mother says that there will also be instances in the girl's life in which she will not have enough to cover basic necessities. For these times, Mother shows her "how to make ends meet." This detail, along with the lessons on how to prepare food and clothes, tells the reader that the family does not have a lot of money, but they have enough to live with some comforts. It seems that Mother's emphasis on the importance of cultivating the appearance of being middle-class is meant to safeguard against falling from esteem during times when the girl cannot afford to maintain middle class norms.

Kincaid illustrates class in the narrative through materialism and snobbery. Openness to everyone is akin to being a "slut," while knowing how to present one's home, particularly to "an important guest," during meals and teatimes is indicative of middle-class domesticity. The understanding that the girl will grow up to live in a house where she will have the means to eat—and, more importantly, serve—three meals a day creates the expectation that she will be middle-class.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BREAD

Bread is a cheap, wholesome food that is integrated into the routines and comforts of family life. In this story, the girl's ability or inability to "feel the bread" symbolizes her perceived fitness or unfitness for wholesome family life. As her last bit of advice, Mother tells the girl that she should always feel bread to ensure that it is fresh. The girl, still uncertain about the rules of propriety that Mother seeks to instill, asks what she ought to do "if the baker won't let [her] feel the bread." The question brings about a rebuke from Mother, who believes that her worst suspicion (that the girl will be a **slut**) has been confirmed by the girl's uncertainty about her worthiness to feel bread. Mother implies that she will lose social value if she becomes a slut, just as bread loses value when it is no longer fresh.



SLUT

"Slut" and "lady" are the narrative's two descriptors of the kind of woman the girl could become. This contrast suggests that there are only two modes of being a woman, and though Mother's instructions are designed to help the girl become a "lady," it's clear that she believes that the smallest social error can transform the girl into a "slut." Traditionally, a "slut" is a promiscuous woman, but Mother, whose voice dominates the narrative, never mentions sex. Instead, "slut" is a catch-all term that describes a woman who

does not know how to behave in social settings. Mother invokes the threat of becoming a slut when telling the girl how to walk, how to tend to the hemlines on her dresses, and how to behave around strange men. Thus, it seems that every aspect of a woman's life—her presence in public space, her clothing choices, and her speech—is touched by sexuality, even if she has no intention of being sexy.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *At the Bottom of the River* published in 1983.

Girl Quotes

☞ Don't walk bare-head in the hot sun.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Mother tells the girl this after instructing her on how to do laundry. Just as there is a proper way to perform household chores, Mother establishes that there is a proper way to appear in public. To walk with a "bare-head" is to go without a headwrap, a common accessory worn by Black Caribbean women. The custom of wearing a headwrap comes from their West African ancestors who were brought to the island as slaves. Though the headwrap is a symbol of modesty in West African cultures, Mother complicates an expression of pride in tradition by specifying that the girl should wear the wrap when it is hot. This advice is a warning not to expose her hair (which is probably naturally curly but straightened due to social custom) to heat and humidity, which would cause it to become kinky. Thus, an emblem of racial heritage is also a method of hiding an aspect of that heritage.

☞ Is it true that you sing *benna* in Sunday school?

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 3


Explanation and Analysis

Mother changes the subject from recipes and household tips to a question about conduct. In this sentence, the nouns *benna* and Sunday school stand in contrast to one another. *Benna* is a product of the unique culture of a Caribbean island (it originated in Antigua and Barbuda, though these islands are never mentioned), while colonial rule had imposed Sunday school on the islanders. *Benna* is an upbeat calypso music sung in dialect, while Sunday school is a place to sing solemn hymns in “proper” English. Moreover, the lyrics to *benna* are a way to share local gossip, which makes it (according to Mother) an improper way of conducting oneself. However, this is an ironic criticism, since Mother’s question itself is based in gossip—clearly, she has heard a rumor about her daughter singing gossipy music in church, so she herself is gossiping, even as she asks her daughter not to.

- On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This advice is part of Mother’s instructions on how to behave in Sunday school, but it is also interspersed with advice on how to eat (so as not to “turn someone’s else’s stomach”) and where to eat (not on the streets, due to flies). Natural acts, such as walking and eating, become complicated by mother’s insistence that there are proper ways to do them. This makes walking less of a natural movement and more of an act of performance. The simile “walk like a lady” suggests imitation, though Mother is never clear about what a “lady” is or how one walks like one, just as she is never clear about what a “slut” is, though she is sure that being a slut is the girl’s natural inclination.

- You mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:   


Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Mother forbids the girl to do this after telling her, explicitly, “don’t sing *benna* in Sunday school.” With the commands “don’t” and “mustn’t,” she strictly imposes restrictions on the girl’s voice. Just as calypso music and holy days do not mix, neither should a presumably middle-class girl and poor boys who hang around a wharf. Wharf-rat boys are suspected criminals, loafing around ports waiting for items to steal. Their association with rodents makes them sound loathsome, like creatures to be avoided if they cannot be exterminated. If the girl speaks to them, she would be acknowledging them as worthy of respect, while Mother’s instruction makes it clear that they are not. Thus, even if they need help, the girl is expected to ignore them or, possibly, risk her own reputation due to placing herself in proximity to undesirable types.

- But I don’t sing *benna* on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4


Explanation and Analysis

This is the first instance in the text in which the girl speaks. Her interjection occurs between Mother’s instruction not to “eat fruits on the street” and her demonstration of “how to sew on a button.” Mother never acknowledges the girl’s statement, but she never returns to the subject either. With her insistence, the girl employs the same negative language that Mother uses when telling the girl how not to walk, eat, and socialize. She has inherited Mother’s language of denial. However, the girl also asserts herself, insisting that she knows the rules. Yet, in certifying her knowledge and obedience of proper conduct, she defies her mother’s insults and low expectations.

- 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.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4


Explanation and Analysis

Mother includes this advice in the form of a barbed insult among instructions on how to sew. The tone is sly, starting off in the form of generally helpful tips on tailoring, then descending into personal contempt for the girl's appearance. Mother instills the expectation that the girl will follow gender-specific behavior by wearing a dress—a clothing item that signifies femininity—but insists that the hem of the dress be maintained so that the girl does not look like a “slut,” though Mother finds this inevitable anyway. The hemline is symbolic of the line that separates proper expressions of femininity from improper ones. It is, thus, the “line” that must not be crossed. Mother's use of the word “bent” reflects her sense that the girl will not maintain the line, that she will disobey the established patterns and become a slut.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Mother's advice on behavior follows her guidance on how to maintain a household and garden. Presentation is key, even if it means rejecting authenticity. Natural signs, such as smiling—a way to express happiness—become ways of masking one's true emotional state. Furthermore, there are

degrees of smiling, ways of portioning out politeness and presenting different modes of being for different people, just as one would set a table differently for different meals or teatimes. It is especially important not to offer too much of oneself to strange men. Mother insists that the girl must behave in a particular way around men because she is subject to their opinions—not the other way around. It is what *they* see that matters, however invalid that view may be. So, if they “recognize” a slut, it would only be because the girl had not heeded her mother's warnings, though the girl is never told what the consequences of such recognition would actually be.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Girl

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5



Explanation and Analysis

Mother's demonstrations of recipes are included with her moral lessons in the form of proverbs, particularly one saying that the girl should not throw stones at blackbirds, “because it might not be a blackbird at all.” Kincaid's choice to place this proverb, which signifies the place of uncertainty in life, contrasts with Mother's definitive expressions of how to prepare recipes and medicines. People usually experiment and improvise in their preparations of food and home remedies, but this creativity is discouraged by Mother's repetition of “this is how,” making it clear, yet again, that there is a particular way to perform tasks.

Furthermore, Mother's inclusion of a recipe for medicine to induce an abortion alongside recipes for cold medicine and traditional food makes it seem as though having or wanting an abortion is a routine aspect of everyday life. Even though Mother has so thoroughly cautioned the girl against being a “slut,” it's clear here that Mother simply doesn't want the girl to be *seen* as a slut. Actually expressing her sexuality, apparently, is normal, and Mother is pragmatic and nonjudgmental in her advice on how to deal with the consequences of sexuality, particularly in a case where an abortion would hide the fact of the girl's sexuality from the public.

☛☛ 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.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Father , Girl

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis


This advice follows Mother's variation on a global proverb about how to throw back a fish "you don't like" to avoid bad luck. In a similar vein, Mother teaches the girl how to deal with men, including what to do when she meets one she does not like. Bullying, in this context, does not have the negative meaning that it usually does. Instead, it is a common part of male-female relations. This is the sole instance in the story in which Mother expresses some leniency for "other ways" of doing things, but only in the specific context of loving a man. Her insistent assumption that the girl's love will be directed at a man is an indirect assertion of heterosexuality as the only acceptable model of love.

There is also a suggestion that Mother's advice is a reflection of her own relationship with Father—the only man in the story who has an identity other than his gender. Just as Mother teaches the girl to iron by using her father's khaki shirt and pants as a model, she implies that her own marriage is a method of "how to love a man."

☛☛ 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?

Related Characters: Girl, Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This is Mother's final piece of advice and the second instance in which the girl speaks. Again, Mother insists that there is a proper way to do things—this time, buying bread—but, the girl questions, for the first time, whether Mother's way of doing things is "always" reliable. The girl's "what if" question raises the possibility of something that Mother might not have considered—that the baker might not want her to feel the bread. However, to Mother, the fault for this would lie with the girl. If he (given his right to judge, the baker is presumably a "he") does not want her near the bread, it is only because he has "recognized" her as the "slut" that she has warned the girl "against becoming." "The kind of woman the baker won't let near the bread" becomes the only workable definition of "slut" that readers get in the story. Mother never addresses any sexual behavior and never describes any particular action or movement that signifies slutty behavior, but the reader does have this image of a baker not allowing a woman to touch bread. There is, thus, something about her—a low hemline or an unladylike walk—that makes her too soiled to touch the bread.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GIRL

The speaker, a mother, tells a girl, her daughter, how to do the laundry, specifying that whites should be washed on Mondays and put on the stone heap, and that colors should be washed on Tuesdays and hung “on the clothesline to dry.”

This first piece of advice establishes that the girl's life will be defined by regimentation and routine, as well as propriety—there is a proper place and time for every activity.



Mother tells the girl not to walk bare-head in the hot sun.

Mother advises her to wear a headwrap, both to retain an air of modesty and to avoid having her hair curl in the humid heat, due to the social pressure for black girls to maintain straight hair.



Mother gives the girl a list of tips, including how best to fry pumpkin fritters and soak salt fish, and how to find the best cotton when making a blouse.

In offering homemaking advice, Mother is also passing along culinary traditions. Food is not only nourishment, but heritage.



Mother tells the girl how to behave in Sunday school. Not only should she not sing benna, but she should also be careful to walk like a lady so that people will not think that she is the **slut** that Mother is certain she will become.

Benna, a form of calypso music with upbeat rhythms and suggestive lyrics, contrasts with the solemnity of a holy day. The community is particularly attentive to others' manners, making it important that the girl is attentive to her own behavior.



Mother tells the girl that she must not speak to wharf-rat boys for any reason at all.

These boys are poor and rumored to engage in criminal activity. The refusal to speak to them marks them as members of a lower and disrespected social class.



The girl interrupts her Mother's instruction not to eat fruit outside to assure her that she does not “sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.”

This is the first time the girl speaks. She asserts herself as someone who follows the rules of propriety, countering Mother's worst assumptions.



Mother tells the girl how to maintain clothes by sewing and ironing. Mother also encourages her to pay special attention to her hemlines because, if they come down too far, she will “[look] like the **slut**” Mother is certain she will become.

Clothing can indicate sexual availability. Neglect can result in being mistaken for an indecent woman, though Mother suspects that this is the girl's fate anyway.



Mother tells the girl how to grow traditional crops, such as okra and dasheen, being sure to maintain proper distance between the house and the garden.

Mother demarcates interior and exterior spaces as separate realms of the girl's future domestic sphere.



Mother gives the girl instructions on how to socialize, including how to give a particular smile depending on one's feelings about a person, how to set tables for tea and mealtimes, and how the girl should behave around strange men.

The focus of these lessons is on self-presentation. Politeness is valued, not authenticity. Mother mentions nothing about speech, but emphasizes behavior, suggesting that the girl will be judged only by her actions.



Mother tells the girl how to manage her body, including the importance of always looking after her hygiene, even if she has to use spit to clean herself, and she warns the girl never to squat to play marbles.

Mother suggests that girls are more vulnerable to dirt, so they should keep their bodies away from it. Ironically, Mother tells the girl to use spit to clean herself, though spit is an unhygienic fluid.



Mother proceeds with advice, such as “don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all” and “this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it.” She also gives demonstrations of how to make home remedies for terminating a pregnancy and for getting over a cold.

Mother's advice includes local Caribbean proverbs as well as global proverbs, showing the influences of both local and foreign cultures in the formation of morals. The recipes are examples of black women's self-sufficiency across generations.



Mother instructs the girl on how to bully a man, then shows her how he will bully her. She then tells the girl that there are a few ways to love a man and assures her that, if those methods do not work, that there are other ways to do it. However, she should give up if those other methods do not work and should not feel like a failure if she does.

Relationships between men and women are, according to Mother, characterized by tension and manipulation. However, Mother expresses some laxity in her rules of propriety and gender norms by telling the girl that she can leave an unworkable relationship.



Mother completes her instruction to the girl by showing her “how to make ends meet,” and also by advising her to “always squeeze **bread** to make sure it's fresh.” This latter advice prompts the girl to ask what she should do if the baker “won't let [her] feel the bread.” Mother, disappointed, asks if, “after all,” the girl will become “the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread.”

The expectation is that the girl will become a homemaker, but Mother's hysterical suspicion is that her advice will make no impact at all and that the girl will instead become a “slut” who would be unwelcome in a bakery, a space related to domesticity.





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