

If you like “Girl,” you might have a taste for magical realism—a style that emerged in the literature of the Caribbean region during the mid-twentieth century and gained practitioners throughout South America—and would enjoy reading the work of Gabriel García Márquez, whose story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” appears in *Stories for Further Reading*.

GOING FURTHER In her interview, Kincaid says “Girl” is in a way a condensed version of her novel *Annie John*, which you might like to read in relation to this short work.

Writing from Reading

Summarize

- 1 Who are the story’s characters, and what do you know about them?

Analyze Craft

- 2 Consider the structure of the story, the order in which the author presents the pieces of advice. How important is the organization of information, and what does it mean?

- 3 What do you know about the setting of the story? Give examples that reveal and describe it.

- 4 Is there dialogue in the story? If so, what form does it take and what function does it serve?

Analyze Voice

- 5 How does the way the girl receives and responds to advice serve to characterize her? Is she a passive character? Why or why not?

Synthesize Summary and Analysis

- 6 What are the distinct characteristics of the two voices in the story?

Discuss how these two voices help generate the implied setting and motion of the story. How would your mental image of the story change if Kincaid had not included the girl’s responses?

Interpret the Story

- 7 In her interview, Kincaid says that the voice in “Girl” is the voice of her mother, but she also says that there is no difference between her voice and the voice in which she writes. Discuss whether Kincaid has captured her mother’s voice, or whether she has filtered that voice through her own.

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FROM READING TO WRITING

“I think that you really can’t be a writer without being a reader.”

Conversation with
ZZ Packer

The first two chapters discussed how reading critically is the means to get your writing started. You look at the title of the work, find out about the author and the context within which a piece was written, and record your impressions by annotating a text or keeping a reading journal about how the elements of craft and the writer’s voice work in a particular story. Whatever your assignment—a summary of the work, a short critical response, or a full-fledged research paper requiring multiple sources—one crucial component of writing effectively emerges when you discover something in the subject that is meaningful to *you*. Here is a quick checklist for writing a paper that may help you get started.

Checklist for Writing

✓ EXPLORE YOUR IDEAS.

Journal, annotate, brainstorm, freewrite, surf the Web, browse the library, and recognize this: Finding meaning is a complex issue that involves multiple perspectives. Toward what aspect of a story do you find yourself turning in thought? What aspect of the story stirs your emotions the most? These turns of mind and feeling will often alert you to your special interest in a story.

✓ DEVELOP A WORKING THESIS.

Make a strong claim that is specific and significant. To maintain a thoughtful tone, you may want to frame your claim as a question you will explore throughout your paper.

✓ CREATE A PLAN.

Outlines (formal and informal) can help you support and develop your claim with evidence.

✓ GENERATE A FIRST DRAFT.

Avoid straight summary (unless this is the assignment), and, unless you revise in your head like Jamaica Kincaid, give yourself time to go back to revise, edit, and format your paper. At this point you may want to get comments from other readers; their comments may help you revise your paper.

✓ REVISE YOUR DRAFT.

Focus on the purpose of your writing and rethink to revise: test your thesis (an exploration of any topic might lead you somewhere you didn't originally set out to go); check that your introduction states your claim; make sure the organization of your paper is clear; note whether your paragraphs are unified and cohesive; check the effectiveness of your transitions; check and double-check your use of quotation and paraphrase; make sure your conclusion answers the question of why your topic (as expressed in your thesis) is important. Save your drafts, label revised drafts with different names, and print hard copies frequently.

✓ EDIT YOUR SENTENCES.

Grammar-checkers are unreliable, and editing is more than a spell-check. A spell-check can't tell you if your sentences are correct and clear.

✓ PROOFREAD AND FORMAT YOUR PAPER.

Spell-checkers don't always catch your typos. Read over your paper carefully and format it according to the instructions of your instructor, or follow the guidelines outlined by the Modern Language Association. Some tips: Use a 12-point typeface, ragged right margin, one-inch margins on all four sides of your paper, double-space, and assign page numbers. Usually a paper will need your name, the professor's name, and the course and section number at the top of the page.

A SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY IN PROGRESS

When Andrew Papadopoulos read "Girl," he annotated the story and took notes on his initial responses. Both his annotations and his notes, reproduced here, show him engaged with the text. He reads *actively* to scrutinize the story's language, asks questions about possible meanings, records thoughts and reactions, and notes important insights. By highlighting and annotating the story, this student interacts, or converses, with it, moving back and forth between the story's details and his developing understanding of those details. As he notes in his commentary, "Girl" condenses the elements of fiction into a single paragraph.

"My writing process, I don't really have one. I read. I find that both walk hand in hand, that when I'm writing, I have to read. Somehow I find that it feeds my own work, and not in a direct way." Conversation with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Andrew focuses on the relationship between the story's two main characters—the second-person narrator, who uses *you* and commands ("Wash the white clothes on Monday"), and the listener, the girl of the story's title. He uncovers meaning from the details contained within this brief narrative to understand who the main characters are and where the story takes place. He notes those clues that point to the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the listener—the speaker's repeated use of the word *slut*; her admonitory, accusatory, and sometimes humorous tone; her reference to "your father"; and her advice on how to behave like a proper woman who tends to home and husband. Andrew interprets the story as an interaction between mother and daughter and isolates the details that reveal the story's domestic setting: okra, dasheen, doukona, and a host of household chores. He makes connections between the story's portrayal of domesticity and its broader implications of gender roles, identity, and society.

Next Andrew develops this initial exploration into a full-length essay that examines how Kincaid's distinctive use of literary techniques—especially the way her narrator addresses the readers directly with *you* (second-person point of view, see chapter 7)—allows the reader to feel like a participant in the story, an eavesdropper on a series of telling exchanges between mother and daughter. As this student demonstrates, fiction can be a lens through which we better visualize our relationship to literature and to the world. It can help us to see aspects of our own lives in new ways, or to catch a glimpse of imaginative worlds we find strange and interesting.

"There is a kind of magic to writing. . . . Anybody here who has written a term paper knows that there is a kind of magic to it. You don't know what it will be. You take notes, but the final product is utterly different from your initial conception of it. That's the joy of writing something." Conversation with T. Coraghessan Boyle

We emphasize throughout this text that literary works don't possess a *single* meaning, but rather *multiple* meanings; these are in turn revealed by reading and writing about a story with a close critical eye. We offer this not as a "finished" critique of "Girl" but as a way of demonstrating the process of responding to a text.

The following sections chart Andrew's progress as he works through his response to this writing assignment:

Assignment: Expand the close reading you completed of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" into a 4- to 5-page essay in which you analyze one or both of the story's main characters. Your analysis should take into account Kincaid's distinctive voice and use of literary techniques.

An Interactive Reading

Written in second person: directed at whom?

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; 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 becoming; 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*; this is how to sew a button; this is how to make a buttonhole 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

Advice for a variety of situations

Narrator asks a question

Now it's a command: "Don't sing..."

Loaded term—gender implications?

Why the repetition?

Now "outdoor" directions

No periods anywhere; very tense, intense

Voice change: listener responds...

But completely ignored...

Suggest mother-daughter conversation

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 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?

Attitude toward love is same as attitude toward work, etc.

What else would a blackbird be? A soul?

Unwanted fish and child treated the same.

Finally acknowledged at the end...

Initial Response

Write an initial response to the text without concern for how formal it sounds or even how logically it flows. In other words, this response is simply your first impressions of the story. Did something stand out to you as important? Were there confusing elements? Don't worry at this point if you don't understand major parts of the story; the more you review the notes you've made and the text itself, the more you will begin to understand.

The first time I read "Girl," I thought it might be difficult to find a lot to say about such a short piece. But after a second and third reading, I realized the story is packed with layers of detail that make it a rich fictional work. I tried to highlight revealing words and phrases and draw connections among sections to show how Kincaid develops elements of craft—like character and setting—and how Kincaid's voice affected my understanding of the story. I found the relationship between the speaker and listener especially interesting; the mother's (I think she's her mother) warnings and advice, and the daughter's sparse, interspersed retorts, define what it means (and doesn't mean) to be a "girl." Being a good "girl," of course, has all sorts of implications about being a good woman, wife, and mother. I'd like to explore these ideas further.

Explore Your Ideas

Freewriting is similar to the initial response—once again, do not worry about the flow of ideas or the language you are using. The difference is that freewriting comes after you have had some time to think about the story and reread it. In a sense, it's your "second response," rather than your initial one, and as such, you may find that you have more ideas and that your freewriting runs longer.

"There's nothing worse than a sheet of blank paper in front of you." Conversation with William Kittredge

After carefully considering his assignment, Andrew reread his close reading of "Girl" and the notes he took during his initial readings of the story. Andrew then moved on to freewrite about the story, writing continuously to get his ideas down on paper, without worrying about making mistakes or whether his initial ideas could be developed into a suitable paper topic. The following excerpt comes from Andrew's freewriting exercise.

This was a very strange but a very beautiful story. For the first few lines I was def. confused, but the more I read the more I got it. It's a mother talking to her daughter, telling her everything she needs to know. I wonder where this story is set? Need to do some research to find out—need to look up a lot of the terms in the dictionary. But even w/o knowing where the story is set, I liked it. My mother always gives me tons & tons of advice. My mother and this mother are actually pretty similar in a lot of ways, even though my mother doesn't like to cook or garden or anything. It's different, too, that I'm a son not a daughter; must keep the diff. in mind. That's prob. the mark of a good piece of writing, that you can get into it even if it doesn't directly relate to you.

Journaling is a writing exercise that helps you focus the ideas you generated in your notes and freewriting. This is the first step in which you should begin to feel your ideas coming together to form something that will eventually become a paper. The idea you found the most interesting from your reading and notes is a good starting place for a journal entry.

Andrew put aside his freewriting for several hours and returned to the story with a fresh perspective. In the following journal entry, he expands his initial freewriting into a more focused discussion of his growing understanding of the story. He considers how the story's characterizations and point of view create interesting effects.

My initial reaction to the first few lines of "Girl" was confusion. But the further I read, the more I warmed up to the character of the narrator. I realized that she is not totally different from my mother, even though it seems clear that this mother and my mother are from very different worlds. But my mother, like the narrator, is constantly emphasizing the right way (or maybe I should say her way) of doing things. And, like the narrator, although my mother can come across as harsh, I know she cares deeply about my success in life.

What's interesting to me, also, is how or why I assume I know that this story is about a mother talking to her daughter. Maybe it's because of the word "slut"—something my mother wd obviously never say to me! And Kincaid never states this directly. In fact, in "Girl," almost nothing about character is stated directly. And yet, after reading this story, I feel like I have a good idea of who the narrator is, and, just as importantly, who the person being talked to is. It would be interesting to go back and see just where and how Kincaid reveals personality and other character details in this story.

All in all, I really enjoyed "Girl." You don't read many stories written from this perspective (the "you" perspective), and it's an interesting way to experience a narrative. Once I pushed through some initial confusion, I found "Girl" was definitely an engaging piece of writing.

Brainstorming may take the form of a list or a web connecting your thoughts. Once you have used a journal entry to narrow down your interests, use your brainstorming session to generate ideas on how to turn the topics that interest you most into a paper.

Andrew's freewriting and journal entry sparked more and more ideas about how he might develop his character analysis. In the following **brainstorming** excerpt, Andrew lists possible topics for his paper, charts details about the story's characterizations, and works toward a **thesis statement**.

Most interesting topics:

- narrator's personality (funny)
- daughter's personality

—setting (Caribbean)

—WHY does the mother say all this . . .

WHO is the narrator and WHO is the daughter—

Learning WHO the characters are and WHY they do things.

CHARACTERS' ACTION	MOTIVATION
Mother telling about cooking	Teaching girl how to run a household
Mother telling her not to talk to wharf-rat boys	Teaching girl how to behave like a girl. My sister Eleni?
Girl arguing with mother	Being independent, tough

Reading "Girl" = much interesting info

Reading the story "Girl," you can learn a lot about who the characters are and why they do what they do.

Develop a Working Thesis

A thesis is a sentence that states the topic of the paper. More than that, a thesis is the writer's argument, the controlling idea that he or she will show and develop in the body of the essay. For more details on how to write a good thesis, see pages H-35 to H-38 in our chapter on Writing from Reading.

Andrew used his brainstorming notes to sharpen his topic and refine his thesis. The following drafted and revised thesis statements show Andrew's progress as he focused his claim and pruned his language.

First-draft thesis:

In "Girl," you can actually learn a lot about the characters.

Second-draft thesis:

A close reading of "Girl" reveals much about the characters of the story.

Third-draft thesis:

A close reading of "Girl" reveals a lot of information about the narrator and her daughter.

Final-draft thesis:

A close reading of "Girl" reveals that Kincaid provides a lot of information about the narrator and the "you" of the story.

Revised final-draft thesis:

A careful, close reading of "Girl" reveals that Kincaid has painted a portrait of both the narrator and the "you" to whom the story is directed.

Create a Plan

With his thesis in mind, Andrew next considered how he would organize his paper to best support his points. He drafted a **topic outline** to guide him through the writing and revising process.

- I. Introduction
 - a. "Girl" initially confusing
 - b. Thesis: A careful, close reading of "Girl" reveals that Kincaid provides a great deal of information about the narrator and the "you" to whom the story is directed.
- II. Identity of characters
 - a. Discussion of tone
 - b. Analysis of clues about gender and relationship of characters
 - i. Specific lines directly related to gender
 - ii. Nature of narrator's advice

- III. Analysis of the narrator
 - a. Tone can be humorous
 - b. Demonstrates warmth
- IV. Analysis of the listener
 - a. Independent and uninterested in mother's advice
 - b. Actually similar to her mother
- V. Narrator's motives
 - a. Discussion of story's final line
 - b. Mother's advice meant to make daughter a respectable woman
- VI. Conclusion
 - a. Analysis of setting of "Girl"
 - b. Story transcends specific setting

Generate a First Draft

After completing his topic outline, Andrew was now ready to write his first draft. He tried to follow the organization of his outline, making each of the important points he planned to elaborate on and support with examples in subsequent drafts.

FIRST DRAFT

A Mother's Advice

Jamaica Kincaid's short-short story "Girl" can seem weird, if not totally bizarre. But careful, repeated reading reveals that Kincaid provides a great deal of information about the narrator and the person the narrator talks to. In other words, "Girl" hides much beneath its mysterious surface.

The first clues as to the identity of the narrator of "Girl" can be found in the story's tone. The narrator's speech is mean and tough. From the language, it is clear that the speaker is someone who is used to being in charge, believes they know the right way to do things, and believes that the person listening must obey. For these reasons, it is likely that the narrator is a parent, speaking to his or her child.

Further, the narrator is probably a woman talking to her daughter. The narrator even says, at one point, "You are not a boy." The narrator's identity as the girl's mother is suggested by the line: "This is how you iron your father's khaki pants so

Parenthetical citation of page number is not necessary for a story printed on one page. The page reference should appear in the Works Cited only.

that they don't have a crease." This instruction suggests a relationship among the narrator, the girl, and the girl's father. The most obvious characterization of this relationship is that the speaker is the girl's mother. The nature of the advice the narrator gives only reinforces this idea, that "Girl" consists of mother-to-daughter counsel.

Kincaid offers other insight into the characters of the story. As mentioned previously, the tone suggests that the narrator is strict and authoritarian. At times, though, she can be humorous. At other times, the narrator shows affection for her daughter.

What we learn about the listener is of course filtered through the view of the narrator. From the more direct statements her mother makes, one could conclude that the girl is in grave danger of becoming a slut. But beyond this, it is possible to learn something of her personality. The sheer amount of advice she is given suggests that she has a lot to learn, at least about cooking and all of that stuff. Thus, she could very well be independent, disinterested in the traditional activities about which her mother instructs her. Even more interestingly, she is probably very similar to her mother: stubborn and strong-willed.

Why is the narrator giving so much advice? We need to look at the final line to answer that question. After the daughter, in another moment of italicized response, questions whether the baker will let her squeeze the bread to see if it's fresh, the narrator says: "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?" This seems to get at what the mother is trying to teach her daughter: what *kind* of woman she should turn out to be.

All the counsel the mother gives the daughter in "Girl" is specific to the setting, the Caribbean. Nonetheless, in the mother's resolve to make her daughter into the kind of woman she envisions, there is something that transcends the specifics. Every parent wants his or her child to grow up to be a respectable adult, and whether the parent goes about it by saving money for college, exposing the child to different languages and cultures, or, as in the story, giving instructions on how to behave, this drive seems as innate as eating or sleeping. Hence, nearly any mother or father can identify with what the narrator is trying to accomplish.

WRITER'S BLOCK

Sometimes called *the midnight disease*, writer's block can be avoided, especially with freewriting, brainstorming, and other exploratory techniques to get you started. Additional strategies to avoid writer's block include:

Resist the temptation to be a perfectionist. Save getting the right word, the stylish phrase, or even the correct spelling for your revising and editing stages.

Take it "bird by bird." Writer Anne Lamott passes along her father's advice to her brother, who had procrastinated on a report about birds—"Bird by bird, buddy, just take it bird by bird"—when she counsels students to break down writing assignments into manageable units.

Start anywhere. If you're stuck on the beginning, pick another section. Go back later and work out the introduction.

Generate more ideas. If you are drawing a blank, you may need to do some more reading or brainstorming. But don't let yourself use "reading some more" as a stalling tactic.

—from Maimon et al., *A Writer's Resource*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

Revise Your Draft

Andrew's second draft includes his changes and annotations to remind himself to clarify and refine his language, provide more textual evidence to bolster his claims, and format his paper according to MLA guidelines (see chapter 40 in this text).

"You're asking [for] a reader's time, so to my way of thinking, you owe them. You owe them clarity." Conversation with Barry Lopez

SECOND DRAFT

Andrew Papadopoulos

Professor Delbanco

Composition 102

A Mother's Advice

Jamaica Kincaid's short-short story "Girl" can seem weird, if not totally bizarre.

A full appreciation of "Girl" requires careful, and even repeated, reading. Such an approach, though, reveals that Kincaid provides a great deal of information about the narrator and the "you" to whom the story is directed. In other words, "Girl" hides much beneath its initially mysterious surface.

The first clues as to the identity of the narrator of "Girl" can be found in the story's tone. The narrator's speech is admonitory, domineering, and tough. From

Be more specific. More formal language?

Quote example from the story.

Why? Explain what's so weird, why you need to be careful.

Much what? Characterization? Details?

this blunt language, it is clear that the speaker is someone who is used to being in charge, believes he or she knows the right way to do things, and believes that the person listening must obey. For these reasons, it is likely that the narrator is a parent, speaking to his or her child.

Further, it is not difficult to conclude that the narrator is a woman, talking to her daughter. The narrator even says, at one point, "You are not a boy." The narrator's identity as the girl's mother is suggested by a different line. The narrator says: "This is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease." This instruction, with its casual reference to "your father," suggests a relationship among the narrator, the girl, and the girl's father. The most obvious characterization of this relationship is that the speaker is the girl's mother, and she is telling her daughter how to iron her father's pants. The nature of the advice the narrator gives only reinforces the idea that "Girl" consists of mother-to-daughter counsel.

More specific.

Explain "so what?"

Paragraph's too short. Fill out with text examples.

Kincaid offers other insight into the characters of the story. As mentioned previously, the tone suggests that the narrator is strict and authoritarian. At times, though, she can be humorous. At other times, the narrator shows affection for her daughter.

Other ways this shows up?

What we learn about the listener is of course mainly filtered through the view of the narrator. From the more direct statements her mother makes, one could conclude that the girl is in grave danger of becoming a "slut." But beyond this, it is possible to learn something of her personality. The sheer amount of advice she is given suggests that she has a lot to learn, at least about cooking and all of that stuff. Thus, she could very well be independent, disinterested in the traditional activities about which her mother instructs her. This idea is supported by the brief moments of interaction in the story (the daughter's responses to her mother's words are set off in italics). These show her questioning her mother and arguing with her assertions. For instance, she insists, "*But I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.*" From this sort of headstrong defense one can conclude that this girl is very much her mother's daughter, strong-willed and determined.

Too informal—clean up.

Need to show how mom's strong-willed?

The larger motives of the narrator can be detected in the story's final line. After her daughter, in another moment of italicized response, questions whether the baker will let her squeeze the bread to see if it's fresh, the narrator says: "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?" This seems to get at what the mother is trying to teach her daughter. Ultimately, it is not important *what* the girl knows, but the "kind of woman" the girl becomes.

Too deep.
Need to relate
to the thesis—
what's hidden?

Need
proof

All the counsel the mother gives the daughter in "Girl" is specific to the setting, the Caribbean. Nonetheless, in the mother's resolve to make her daughter into the kind of woman she envisions, there is something that transcends the specifics. Every parent wants his or her child to grow up to be a respectable adult, and whether the parent goes about it by saving money for college, exposing them to different languages and cultures, or, as in the story, giving instructions on how to behave, this drive seems as innate as eating or sleeping. Hence, nearly any mother or father can identify with what the narrator is trying to accomplish.

Sentence too
long—break
up or rewrite.

Edit Your Sentences, Proofread and Format Your Paper

Andrew uses these notes to develop his final draft, in which he fleshes out his character analysis and discusses the significance of the story's point of view, tone, and setting. For the final draft, he also checks his spelling, word choice, transitions, and sentences for clarity and grammatical correctness. He also makes sure he has provided ample evidence from the story itself with quotations, and he checks to make sure these quotations are correctly formatted in-text references, which correspond to a Work Cited page at the end of his paper (see the handbook for writing from reading for MLA formatting guidelines). He also incorporates paraphrase and summary where context is needed but quotations are not necessary. Andrew's progress shows his easeful back and forth with the story as he continually revises his interpretation of it.

"I was not a good student. I was not particularly good in English. Yet I am a writer. And this, I think, points to something relevant which is that it's not about talent, necessarily. You [just need to] do whatever is required, because you want it more. That was my experience."

Conversation with Amy Hempel

FINAL DRAFT

Papadopoulos 1

Student name,
instructor
name, course
number, and
date

Andrew Papadopoulos

Professor Delbanco

Composition 102

15 April 2008

A Mother's Advice

Essay title

On first encounter, Jamaica Kincaid's short-short story "Girl" can seem enigmatic, if not simply baffling. While most works of fiction are written in either the first or the third person, "Girl" is written in the second person: the "you" voice. This makes the beginning of the story fairly disorienting, as the reader is likely unaccustomed to this narrative perspective. Additionally, because the story is so short, the reader may reach the end before the feeling of disorientation ever goes away. A full appreciation of "Girl" requires careful, and even repeated, reading. Such an approach, though, reveals that Kincaid provides a great deal of information about the narrator and the "you" to whom the story is directed. In other words, "Girl" hides much beneath its initially mysterious surface, mainly, details about the characters.

Introduction
leading toward
thesis

Thesis

The first clues as to the identity of the narrator of "Girl" can be found in the story's tone. From the first lines, the narrator's speech is admonitory, domineering, and tough. The story begins with "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun." From this direct, blunt language, it

Discussion of
tone illustrated
with exampleFur
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Papadopoulos 2

is clear that the speaker is someone who is used to being in charge, believes he or she knows the right way to do things, and, importantly, believes that the person listening must obey. For these reasons, it is likely that the narrator is a parent, speaking to his or her child. This interpretation certainly fits the relationship suggested by the story's commanding language.

Further, it is not difficult to conclude that the narrator is a woman, talking to her daughter. The narrator even says, at one point, "You are not a boy." This fairly well clears up any mystery as to the listener's gender! The narrator's identity as the girl's mother is suggested by a line earlier in the story. The narrator says, "This is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease." This instruction, with its casual reference to "your father," suggests a relationship among the narrator, the girl, and the girl's father. The most obvious characterization of this relationship is that the speaker is the girl's mother, and she is telling her daughter how to iron her father's pants.

Textual analysis as part of a discussion of the characters' genders.

The nature of the advice the narrator gives only reinforces the idea that "Girl" consists of mother-to-daughter counsel. The narrator has recommendations for cleaning, cooking, gardening, and washing—all domestic chores, traditionally considered women's work. Further, the narrator has plenty of ideas on how to behave like a "lady" and not a "slut." Obviously, this is the sort of gender etiquette one woman would pass on to another, particularly a mother to a daughter.

Further textual analysis of characters' relationship

In addition to the familial relationship between the narrator and the listener, Kincaid offers other insight into the characters of the story. As mentioned previously, the tone suggests that the narrator is strict and authoritarian. At times, though, she can be humorous, as when she says, "Always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach." Although the statement implies criticism (specifically, that the girl eats in a way that *does* turn people's stomachs), the advice cannot be taken as wholly serious. At other times, the narrator demonstrates affection for her daughter. For example, about men, she says, "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." There is a warmth to these lines that shows the narrator truly cares that her daughter avoids the deeper pitfalls of love.

Character
analysis of the
narrator

Character
analysis of the
listener

What we learn about the listener, the "girl" of the story's title, is of course mainly filtered through the view of the narrator. From the more direct statements her mother makes, one could conclude that the girl is in grave danger of becoming a "slut." But beyond this, it is possible to learn something of her personality. The sheer amount of advice she is given suggests that she has a lot to learn, at least about cooking and such. Thus, she could very well be independent, disinterested in the traditional activities about which her mother instructs her. This idea is supported by the brief moments of interaction in the story (the daughter's responses to her mother's words are set off in italics). These show her questioning her mother and arguing with her assertions. For instance, she insists, "*But I don't sing benna on*

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Sundays at all and never in Sunday school. From this sort of headstrong defense one can conclude that this girl is very much her mother's daughter, strong willed and determined.

Given what can be learned about the two characters in the story—mother and daughter—it is interesting to consider *why* the narrator feels compelled to give the girl so much advice. It almost seems as if she wants to tell her daughter every single thing she will need to know, but this of course is impossible. Her larger motives can be detected in the story's final line. After her daughter, in another moment of italicized response, questions whether the baker will let her squeeze the bread to see if it's fresh, the narrator says, "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?" This seems to get at the heart of what the mother is trying to teach her daughter. Ultimately, it is not important *what* the girl knows, but the "kind of woman" the girl becomes. The many lessons of the story represent the accumulated knowledge of a particular type of woman—dignified, competent, capable, wise. These are the qualities the mother hopes to pass on, more than tips about planting okra.

Larger discussion of the narrator's motives

All the counsel the mother gives the daughter in "Girl" is specific to a particular setting. From the details of food (okra, dasheen) and music (*benna*), one can conjecture that this setting is in the Caribbean, where Jamaica Kincaid grew up. Further, all the counsel deals with the rural, domestic realm the mother inhabits and controls. Nonetheless, in the mother's resolve to make her daughter into the kind of

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Conclusion
broadening
the essay's
argument to a
more general
point

woman she envisions, there is certainly an element that transcends these specifics.

Every parent wants his or her child to grow up to be a respectable adult. Whether the parent goes about it by saving money for the child's college, exposing him or her to different languages and cultures, or, as in "Girl," giving instructions on how to behave like a lady, this drive seems as innate as any fundamental parental instinct. Hence, nearly any mother or father, or even anyone who has mentored another in any capacity, can identify with what the narrator is trying to accomplish.

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