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Global Literature II

20 April 2023

How does the mother's instruction about proper behavior reflect her desire to preserve Antiguan traditions, and how does this affect the daughter's sense of self?

Preserving Antiguan Traditions

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" is a powerful short story that explores the complicated relationship between a Mother, whose goal is to instill proper Antiguan behavior/ traditions, and a daughter who is trying to find her own identity amongst her mother's strict traditional values. In this paper, I will analyze the methods and languages the mother uses to preserve Antiguan values and analyze the effect of the mother's instruction on the daughter's sense of self.

In "Girl", the mother's instructions come off as harsh and deeming, but ultimately they come from a place of love, just wanting her daughter to meet the expectations of how proper Antiguan women should behave. In the story, the Mother warns her daughter against engaging in risky behaviors that are looked down upon in their community. One example of this is when the Mother says to her daughter: "On Sundays try to walk 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." (Kincaid 1382). The first phrase "try to walk like a lady" implies that the daughter should carry herself with a type of decorum, and implies that she should avoid any movements that may give her a un lady-like appearance. The mother emphasizes " the slut you

are bent on becoming”, to further reinforce there is a clear distinction between ladylike and un-ladylike behavior. The instruction from the mother about the daughter not singing in Sunday school and not talking to Wharf-rat boys shows the mother's concern for her daughter's reputation and the peers her daughter decides to surround herself with. Overall, this quote shows the traditional roles of Caribbean women, and what lengths the mother will go; to preserve these traditions.

The mother also includes instructions on how to be a proper Antiguan wife, and how to honor the traditional norm of an obedient wife. She tells her daughter the following: “Always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh...to soak saltfish overnight before you cook it... to wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap”(Kincaid 1382). By doing this the mother places importance on performing household tasks. By giving the daughter these instructions, the mother shows us the readers how she values passing down this practical knowledge, as this was most likely retold to her by her mother. This quote is important because it showcases how important it was to the mother to pass down this knowledge; which in a way helped maintain the traditions of the family/community.

One of the most prominent ways the mother tries to preserve Antiguan culture/tradition is when she instructs her daughter to “soak your little clothes right after you take them off”(Kincaid 1382). Not only is the mother trying to stress the importance of cleanliness and proper hygiene, but the mother is also making known the importance of modesty and sexual purity. In Antiguan culture, a woman's purity is of uttermost importance; this is a big reason why the Mother takes a harsher tone when lecturing her daughter throughout the story on topics like proper etiquette, household maintenance, and interacting with peers.

The Daughter's Sense of Self

While the mother's lectures come from well-intent; they do have a great effect on the daughter's formation and sense of self. Although the mother believes she is teaching her daughter the proper way to behave; she unknowingly constraints and limits the daughter's ability to be her own person and define her core values; all while silencing the girl into submission.

One of the ways the daughter's sense of self is impacted is through the constant reinforcement of gender roles. For instance, the mother says, "This is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease" (Kincaid 1382). This specific instruction places importance on domestic duties and also reinforces the notion that women should put household obligations over personal interests. Another instance is when the mother says not to talk to Wharf-rat boys; this instruction discourages the daughter from interacting with peers of her age; because it may be seen as flirtatious or sexual misconduct by an own looker. With all this being said, the Mother is unknowingly reinforcing the belief that the daughter's worth and importance is solely based upon how well she can conform to Antiguan gender norm; this further discourages the daughter from partaking in any self-exploratory endeavors that might not be socially acceptable in her community; which in all further places her into a box, limiting her potential.

In another instance, the mother impacts the daughter's sense of self by providing detailed instructions on how to dress. For instance, she instructs her daughter on how to wear a scarf, and how to keep her shoes clean. These instructions again place importance on appearance in Antiguan society. This also teaches the daughter that her outward presentation means more than the aspects of her personality and character.

In Sum, Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl", highlights the desire of Antiguan mothers to preserve tradition and pass down said traditions to her daughter. However, these instructions are detrimental to the formation and development of the daughter's sense of self. The mother's agenda to instill lessons of gender roles, appearances, and sexual purity, restrict the daughter's freedom and self-discovery. The story depicts the struggle to maintain traditional values while allowing room for self-expression to grow. Ultimately, "Girl" shows how the expectations of society and tradition can impact individuality, this story showcases a common struggle that isn't just unique to Antiguan communities, but a struggle that is occurring all over the world.

Works Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. "Girl." *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*. 3rd ed., edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, pp. 216-217.