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Women: Powerfully Submissive

By: Urja Patel

Imagine being a girl in the 1900s with dreams and a desire for independence. Many people assume that being a girl has many advantages and benefits, however, in the 1900s, many young women were mistreated especially when they had a poor background. Although Jamaica women were Kincaid in her short story “Girl,” does not say so directly, she assumes that girls are treated like prisoners by the society, especially by men who would often view them as objects. In the story, Kincaid writes specific details that are necessary for a girl to follow in a society. She clarifies how to do the jobs that are assigned to them and how to behave around men. Kincaid shows how the society controls a woman and how they are psychologically impacted because of the dominance. She does this by using a single tone throughout the story until the end, by slut-shaming, and by constantly reminding the young girl that she is not a boy to symbolize how women are not treated with the same respect as men.

Kincaid starts her story using a single tone which symbolizes the mother's lack of emotions. Throughout the story, the mother recited commands for her daughter to follow without showing sympathy. It seems like she memorized the instructions in her head which shows that she is completely brainwashed. In the middle of the story, she says, “this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child” (321). The mother just gave her daughter

the potion to abort her child without showing emotions. In general, a mother would have a strong feeling against abortion, especially in the 1900s, when abortion was very controversial and had just started to happen. However, the mother is represented completely opposite of what most women would've been in the 1900s. She seems to be pressured into a society where the rules are tied around a girl's neck. Her use of monotone demonstrates her giving up on the rules and the society. Her being frustrated of her existence and people in it, eventually, that feeling will overcome her daughter too. Toward the end of the story, the mother says, "if they [methods to love a man] don't work don't feel too bad about giving up" (321). This was the first time the mother gave an order with feelings involved. She gave the daughter a little freedom especially when it comes to men. She expressed that it was okay to give up which could be the reflection of her own life. She gives more freedom to her daughter by stating, "this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it" (321). Spitting is the act that is often performed by men and when the mother gave her daughter that right, she automatically gave her a little freedom to express her feelings. This is the first time she acts like a true mother instead of an instructional manual. She grants her daughter the right to express her feelings and along with it, she showed some care for her daughter.

Even though the mother gives a little freedom to her daughter, she also slut-shames her very often in the story to make her emotionally strong. She constantly criticizes her daughter of being a slut for doing things that a regular teenager would do. She says, "o

n Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming” (320). This shows how the mother really feels about her daughter, especially because she calls her own daughter a slut. Even the mother does not respect the daughter. Generally, a mother would view her child with the greatest concern and respect, but the mother in the story is abusing her daughter by using such vulgar language. She is mentally traumatizing her daughter, but at the same time getting her ready to face the society. She is personally damaging her daughter's confidence so no one else could hurt her more than the damage that she is creating. She wants her daughter to be strong, both physically and mentally and hopes that her daughter does not turn out the way she has. She does not want her daughter to be damaged by the society like she is. She is trying to make sure that her daughter is not traumatized by the dominant males in the society. To help her, the mother instructs, "this is how you bully a man” (321). The mother is giving some techniques to her daughter to use in case she wants to defend herself or to prove that she still has power. However, right after that statement, the mother adds, “this is how a man bullies you,” to hand more power to men again (321). She is also telling her daughter that it is okay to be dominated by men. That it is normal to be submissive to men and to be under their control. The daughter has reached an age in her life where she will be inferior by men. Men are going to take advantage of her especially because of her youth, and that is what the mother wants her daughter to be ready for; which is why she keeps calling her own daughter a slut because that is what the society is going to call her.

Along with slut shaming, the mother also keeps reminding her daughter that she is not a boy to show that boys are treated differently than girls in a society. She mentions, “don't squat to play marbles —you are not a boy, you know” (321). This shows how young, innocent girls are not even allowed to play games that are common between children. They are expected to be more mature and to behave ladylike. They are not allowed to do things that boys are free to do even if it is as simple as squatting. They are often pushed down just because they are girls. Boys have more freedom than girls and they will continue having it until the thinking of the whole society is changed, which is next to impossible. The mother's constant reminder helps her daughter get ready for what the society is going to say to her when she gets too close to getting her freedom and independence. Often times, the society is afraid of women being more powerful than men, therefore, it makes women feel like they do not have as much freedom as men. The as society needs the comfort of feeling like men still have more power over women. The mother has felt this power, therefore she is preparing her daughter for the same trauma. She wants her daughter to be ready and be less emotionally traumatized than herself.

Throughout the whole story, the use of monotone along with slut shaming and the constant reminder that girls are not boys, helps the mother assemble her daughter's mind to help her face the society. Kincaid uses these techniques to show the dominance of men and society on women. Many of the things that are mentioned in the story are still controversial today such as an abortion, society's expectations from women, and slut shaming. The word “slut” is used to describe a

female and never a male. There are other words that are used to describe a female such as “whore,” “hoe,” and many others; however, there are only one or two words that are used to describe a man who has “slut” like personality. Many people would automatically assume that a girl is being called a slut because it's a crime for women to do exactly what men do, sleep around.