

Mariah in jamaica kincaid's lacy



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Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Lucy*, revolves, in large part, around the immigration and acclimation experiences of the title character, who has left her small Caribbean island to forge a new life in New York City. Yet there is another female in this novel's cast of characters who is equally important to the development of the plot, and that person is Mariah, Lucy's employer. Mariah comes to represent a range of symbolic figures for Lucy over the course of the novel. Initially Lucy considers her an erudite and accomplished woman who lives an enviably comfortable life. As time passes, however, Lucy sees how Mariah, despite her position of privilege, lacks knowledge about the world beyond her own tiny microcosm and basic life skills. It is through Mariah that Lucy is able to devise a model for the person who she would like to become, and it is also Mariah from whom she must break free in order to become that person. In these ways, then, Mariah is the agent and catalyst for Lucy's development. On the surface, Mariah appears to have the perfect life. She has a beautiful family, which is comprised of herself, her handsome husband, and their beautiful and charming daughters. Mariah and her husband are also wealthy, which is evidenced not only by the fact that they can hire Lucy as an au pair, but also by the fact that they travel and have been to the Caribbean. Initially, though, what Lucy notices is that Mariah has a refrigerator that is so full that there is food leftover from the day before, and that the building in which she lives has an elevator-which Lucy has never seen or ridden in her life. These are all exterior markers of Mariah's achievement of living a particular kind of good life. Lucy believes that Mariah and her husband are sincere when they invite her to "regard them as my family and make myself at home" (p. 7). Despite Lucy's admiration of Mariah's seemingly flawless life, she does not connect with Mariah

immediately or intimately. For her part, Mariah is equally fascinated with Lucy. She observes that Lucy has an interesting history, and strokes Lucy's face in a gesture that is tender yet perhaps oversteps boundaries of appropriate behavior. Mariah seems to be completely unaware of her position of privilege and power, and while she does not have bad intentions for Lucy, her actions fail to consider Lucy's cultural background, experiences, needs, and feelings. Mariah wants Lucy to see the world exactly in the manner that she does. One of the earliest and most defining moments of their relationship comes when Mariah attempts to convince Lucy to see daffodils as she sees them. Lucy, however, has a different association with daffodils, one that Mariah simply cannot understand. She insists that she will show Lucy the Great Lakes, the magic of spring, the zoo, and any number of sights and attractions that Lucy has never seen. It is as if Mariah wants to mother Lucy; Lucy is so different and so lacking in certain experiences that she presents Mariah with an interesting and challenging project. Clearly, this is a project that is doomed to fail. Mariah and Lucy have radically different frames of reference. Mariah, unaware of the invisible privileges conferred upon her by her class, her race, and her nationality, is not capable of seeing the world and its disappointments and dangers from Lucy's point of view. She knows little, if anything, about Lucy's home country and culture. In fact, it becomes painfully obvious to the reader who is familiar with postcolonial theory that Mariah knows very little about her own country and culture in terms of its position as a colonizer, both historically and within contemporary contexts. Mariah's naivete and ignorance are displayed in the chapter that is titled with her name. When Mariah blindfolds Lucy and leads her to the daffodils, then forcefully encourages Lucy to see the same kind of beauty

that she sees, Mariah is unconsciously playing the role of the colonizing master, albeit a seemingly kind and gentle one. She cannot understand why Lucy reacts so violently to this experience, which underscores Mariah's lack of knowledge about the world beyond the boundaries of her own happy family. Mariah's happiness, however, is both fragile and ephemeral. The perfect life she has constructed for herself begins to collapse when her husband, Lewis, has an affair with Mariah's best friend, Dinah. Again, the reader sees just how naïve and vulnerable Mariah is, and how actively she tries to defend against chaos in her well-ordered world. When Lewis's infidelities come to pass, Lucy begins to understand that her perception of Mariah lacked depth, even though her "sympathies were with Mariah" (p. 48) and even though Mariah appears to be the marital partner who is in control because she kicks Lewis out. Despite Lucy's loyalty, it is after this episode that Mariah falls from the pedestal upon which Lucy had placed her. Through Mariah, Lucy learns a valuable lesson about the nature of appearances and the fragility of the so-called "good life," the continuity of which is never guaranteed. This lesson is bitter, perhaps, but it is one that cannot be learned from a book, even one of the feminist texts that Mariah gives to Lucy. It is this lesson that also serves as the crucial turning point in the plot of the novel, for it allows Lucy to begin to break free from Mariah and forge her own identity. Mariah, then, is not necessarily a character who exists in this novel for the purpose of experiencing her own transformation, even though she does experience a significant shift. Mariah's experiences, however, are important to the novel to the extent that they serve as the crucible in which Lucy is able to forge her own transformation. The novel *Lucy* could, if written from a different perspective, be titled and written about

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Mariah, for she is a complex character who plays many roles and who undergoes various transformations: changes in her awareness and perception, changes in her friendships, and changes in her interpersonal relationships, most notably her marriage. When Lucy is finally able to identify and observe Mariah's character weaknesses, she is able to break away from Mariah and pursue her own path. It was important, then, for Mariah to play the role that she occupies in this novel. Mariah was the first, and for a while, the only, female figure with whom Lucy had contact and with whom she could connect after leaving her family and her homeland. For these reasons, Mariah took on special significance, playing the parts of friend, mother, and role model at various points in the novel. Ultimately, however, Mariah becomes the anti-role model. At the novel's end, Lucy breaks away from Mariah, much as she had broken away from her biological mother and her symbolic mother, her country, when she left her island. Lucy comes to realize that Mariah is not a person to be emulated; in fact, the only way in which Lucy can become her own person is to forge her own path. While the reader does not know where that path will take her, Lucy has clearly learned the lessons that she needed to understand before she could actualize herself as an independent woman. Mariah was the critical figure who allowed Lucy to form this identity through both connection and conflict.