

How narrative structure can send a message



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Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* communicates strong messages about both society's expectations of women, and the way that certain things told to someone can have a large impact on them. The piece is written in the form of a continuous list. This style emulates our inner stream of consciousness and emphasizes the many messages expressed in the story and their lasting impact. The narrative form does a lot for the story, creating deeper meaning, and allowing the speaker to connect to readers more effectively.

Kincaid highlights the overbearing expectations of women in society through the story's list consisting of countless demands. Though it does not directly address who is speaking or giving the orders, they can be interpreted as lessons and cautionary advice given by a mother or mentor figure to a "Girl," like the one referenced in the title. The list can be seen as the girl's inner thoughts, as she recalls what has been told to her, the messages running through her mind. The commands are given as guidance and explain standards to the girl, telling her to "always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach," and to "try to walk like a lady." The girl acts as a symbol for all girls, and the list of commands can be understood as standards set for all women. With the entire story being a list of such commands, Kincaid stresses how many standards there are for girls and how high the expectations are. The stipulations being rattled off to the girl in such a long list helps Kincaid to make a point about how much pressure is put on girls, suggesting that society can be oppressive to women.

The story itself does not blatantly affirm the speaker's emotions, but its structure mirrors her thoughts and thus reveals her reaction to all of the pressure exerted on her. The continuous flow of ideas reflects a stream of

consciousness, familiar to all readers. Most people can relate to certain things said to them that linger in their mind, sometimes being repeated over and over, like a mother's advice teaching you "how you set a table for lunch." The messages that are cemented in our minds and repeated this way are the ones that really mean something to us; they are important lessons we need to remember that have a strong impact on us. Kincaid gives readers a look into the mind of the girl. She doesn't have to candidly say how the girl feels because she shows what is going on in her mind. As the list that reflects her inner thoughts, Kincaid reveals how deeply impacted the girl is by all of the things she is being told to do. Kincaid shows that these messages are all the girl can think about, and everything said to her has been completely internalized, suggesting that she is completely overwhelmed by it.

By embodying the girl's inner thoughts, Kincaid is able to connect with her audience on a deeper level. Everyone can relate to the way past conversations repeat in your mind. The tone is also familiar to readers; the many pieces of advice and instructions for everyday life, warning you to be sanitary because "you might catch something" are given in the same voice any parent would use mentoring a child. This familiarity enables Kincaid to more effectively connect with readers, but specific word choice and certain phrases allow her to connect to readers on an even deeper, emotional level. Though some of the messages listed in the story are positive and guiding, others are more accusatory and crude. With all of the messages going through her mind, the girl remembers several demeaning things said to her, like advice given so that people "won't recognize immediately the slut I

have warned you against becoming.” By including messages like this, with vulgar word choice calling the girl a “slut,” Kincaid evokes an emotional reaction from readers, who imagine a mother telling her daughter to “prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are.” In doing this Kincaid is able to capture the reader’s attention more, and create a sense of anger through her display of society’s standards for girls. As the list is also compiled of almost all things told to the girl, only two short phrases put in italics represent her own dialogue. The girl replies to two of the instructions given to her. In one of these instances she defends herself when she is accused of singing benna in Sunday school and told not to; she says “but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.” The two times that the girl replies back are also relatable to readers as they resemble a desperate reply to the messages repeating in her mind; she is talking back. She is only speaking in her thoughts, however, which most people can relate to as a moment when you think back to a conversation and come up with comebacks or words that you wish you said to someone in that conversation. By including these two moments where the girl’s own words are used, Kincaid is able to further connect with readers. The fact that the entire piece represents the thoughts going through the girl’s mind, yet only two short phrases are her own dialogue, where she inwardly defends herself, shows how strongly the instructions and orders stick with her; they are the only things going through her mind. It also suggests a sense of oppression as this is all that matters to her, and she has no voice and no further personal opinions besides the two brief occasions that she uses her own words.

Kincaid uses unique narrative structure to create deeper meaning and to better connect with her readers. By mirroring the speaker's inner thoughts, she presents the issue of society's damaging and overbearing standards for women. In showing the way that high expectations and excessive instruction internally impacts girls, she is able to address the problem of society's oppressive view of women and get readers more engaged in the topic.