

“Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid (1978) – Suggested Lesson Procedure (2 days)

1. Have students complete the before reading activity for the short story “Girl.” This will preview what the literature is about and require students to consider how words are related to each other as well as the overall topic. It also builds anticipation for students before they read.
2. Review the “terms to know” on the literary analysis questions worksheet.
3. Read the story out loud as a class. The story is short, so I read it by myself. It takes about 4-5 minutes. I also read it straight through, no stopping to discuss at all. Personally, I feel it’s important to read without a break because students then get the full effect of the message, and there is a greater impact.
4. Before jumping into the literary analysis, I let my students digest the literature. Ask students to do a think-pair-share. Ask them: *what is your initial reaction to the story?* Then call on volunteers to share out loud. At this point, I also answer any student questions about the story.
5. You can have students work independently to answer the literary analysis questions, but I usually let my students work in pairs. Whatever students don’t complete in class is homework (unless you prefer to give them additional time the next day).
6. Check that your students completed the literary analysis questions. Then, go over the answers as a class. This is a really important step for students while practicing literary analysis because it enhances their understanding of the literature and models techniques they will use in the future.
7. Hand each student a copy of the independent journal prompt. Give students a minimum of 10 minutes to complete their journal prompts. Collect them for credit if you wish.
8. Pass out the “Life Advice” activity. Have students complete the worksheet *independently* because their advice should come from their own personal values and lifestyle. Once students are done, ask them to get in groups of 3-5 for discussion. Students will share their responses in their small groups as well as compare how their words of wisdom are similar and different from mother’s advice to her daughter in the story.

Note to teachers: Due to copyright law, I am unable to offer a full text version of the story. If you enter “Girl by Jamaica Kincaid” into any search engine, you will find a copy of the story available for you to print and use in class. Here is the link I used: [full text Girl by Jamaica Kincaid](#).

Name:

Date:

Before Reading

Part A. Directions: Write down the first word that comes to your mind as you read each word below.

Example:

Field

Baseball

1. Wash

2. Sunday

3. Button

4. Ants

5. Khaki

6. Sweep

7. Blackbird

8. Marbles

9. Medicine

10. Bread

Part B. Directions: Write a prediction about what you think this story will be about.

Name:

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“Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid (Published 1978)

Terms to Know

bent	determined to do
benna	a genre of Antiguan music characterized by sexually suggestive lyrics
wharf-rat	a person who hangs out around wharves sometimes with the intent to steal from ships or warehouses
okra	the small green pods from a tropical plant eaten as a vegetable
dasheen	a starchy tuber that is usually served boiled or cut up and used as a thickener in hearty soups
doukona	a kind of Jamaican pudding made from starchy food which is sweetened and spiced
pepperpot	a stewed meat dish popular in Guyana and the rest of the Caribbean
spit in the air	To be doing something totally pointless
make ends meet	To earn enough money to live

Literary Analysis Questions

1. Who are the two main characters in this story? What is their relationship like?

The girl and her mother are the two characters. The mother is explaining to her daughter all the ways she must be responsible and respectable as she grows older. The daughter stays quiet while her mother speaks, demonstrating that she is listening to her mother intently and will not interrupt her. The mother is clearly worried about her daughter's quality of life showing that she loves her daughter. On the other hand, the mother speaks accusingly to her daughter which indicates there is some tension between them, especially when the daughter claims she never sings benna.

2. What information do readers know about the girl?

The girl is young and she only speaks twice throughout the whole story. The first time she speaks is to defend herself, saying, “but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.” This shows readers that the girl considers herself a good kid—according to her mother’s standard. The girl also asks, “But what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?” This indicates the daughter may be timid and not as self-assured or outspoken as her mother.

3. What type of woman does the mother want her daughter to be? What does she not want her to be?

The mother wants her daughter to be humble, proper, and responsible; responsible enough to run a proper household and have respect from others in the community. Her mother does not want her to be a “slut” or someone who is looked down upon by society.

4. How is the term “slut” used in this story in a non-sexual way? Why is the mother so concerned?

“Slut” is used as a catch-all term that describes a woman who does not know how to behave in social settings. The mother values modesty and good manners over honesty. Her mother seems to think her daughter is “bent” or determined to be devalued in society, so she is concerned for her daughter’s well-being in a culture that seems unforgiving of women.

5. What evidence is there that the girl is already obliged to cater to men?

The following line shows that women must clean for men. “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.” Women are responsible for taking care of men, not only their husbands, but their fathers and sons as well.

6. What is implied by the following lines?

“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.”

Girls are expected to smile at everyone regardless of whether they like them or not.

7. Could the following line have a duplicitous meaning? Explain. “Don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you.”

There is the literal meaning that eating fruit attracts flies which may make you seem unclean. Then, there is the metaphorical meaning, that if you show too much skin in public, you will attract unwanted attention. If you don’t dress conservative on the street, you are inviting dishonorable men to approach you and all people will think less of you.

8. What is the significance of the following line? “Be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit.”

It is very important for women to be clean at all times. There is never a reason for a woman to appear unkempt. This shows that not only are women expected to behave in certain ways, there is also a high standard for physical appearances as well.

9. What types of social behaviors are normalized in this story?

It is normal for women to endure verbal or physical abuse from men, considering the line: “this is how a man bullies you.” Additionally, women are expected to do all of the house chores like cleaning and cooking. The line, “always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach” tells readers that people are always watching women and judging them.

10. What does the girl’s ability or inability to “feel the bread” symbolize?

If the baker doesn’t let you touch the bread, it implies you are “unclean” in some way. The mother is saying that after everything she just told her daughter, the daughter should undoubtedly be allowed to touch the bread otherwise the mother’s worst fear has come true.

11. How does the author incorporate her West Indian culture into the story?

She includes details about certain recipes, gardening advice, superstitions, and medicinal advice that are specific to her culture. For example, mother explains to cook pumpkin fritters in very sweet oil and to soak salt fish overnight before cooking it. The mother also discusses a list of foods like doukona and pepper pot which demonstrates her culinary traditions and native foods.

12. What effect does the repetition of mother's advice have on the entire story?

The advice is demanding and extremely particular; it is overwhelming because there are so many social responsibilities for women to uphold. The repetition makes readers anxious and sets the tone. The tone is assertive, commanding, serious, superior, forward, and concerned.

13. In many ways, this isn't a traditional short story. What elements of the short story appear to be missing?

The story has characters, conflict, point of view, and setting. The story is missing dialogue and a developed plot. There are no sequence of events, nor any events that actually occur; it is only filled with hypothetical situations. There is no resolution.

14. What does the power struggle between mother and daughter reveal about the larger experience of oppression in Antiguan society?

Women can find empowerment and productivity through domesticity. If women can learn how to behave in front of all different types of people (and please everyone), they will be treated better by their community. These standards are oppressive to women because women are prevented from being who they really are, pursuing their own goals, and potentially having a career or life that doesn't revolve around domestic responsibilities. If women break the social norms, they are looked down upon and will be treated as lower-class citizens, while men are not held to the same high standard.

15. Do you think the story is intended to be seen as a single scene, or do you think it is intended as statements given over many years? Explain.

Answers will vary.

16. Do you think the mother is a good mother? Why or why not?

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4. How is the term “slut” used in this story in a non-sexual way? Why is the mother so concerned?

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6. What is implied by the following lines? “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.”

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11. How does the author incorporate her West Indian culture into the story?

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Journal Prompt

In your own life, what responsibilities do you have to your family, to your community, and to society? What expectations do you wish others did not place on you?

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Pretend you are giving life advice to someone younger than you whom you care about. Write a piece of advice in each of the blank boxes about the topic listed in the left-hand column. Your advice should reflect your personal morals as well as your culture and society.

1. Cooking/Eating	
2. Cleaning/Laundry	
3. Speaking/Social Norms	
4. Dating/Marriage	
5. Education/School	
6. Hosting/Entertaining	
7. Sleeping/Rest	
8. Shopping/Finances	
9. Appearances/Style	
10. General Living	

Discussion: Share your favorite pieces of advice with your group. How are your words of wisdom (the advice you listed above) similar and different from mother’s advice to her daughter in the story “Girl”?