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Annie John, by Jamaica Kincaid

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ANNIE JOHN

Author: Jamaica Kincaid (Elaine Potter Richardson, 1949-)

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Bildungsroman

Time of plot: The late 1950's to the mid-1960's

Locale: Antigua, West Indies

First published: 1985

Principal characters:

ANNIE VICTORIA JOHN, a precocious, vibrant, and fiercely independent young woman

MRS. ANNIE JOHN, Annie's loving but unpredictable mother
MR. ALEXANDER JOHN, Annie's father, a quiet and thoughtful man

GWENETH (GWEN) JOSEPH, Annie's first best friend

THE RED GIRL, a red-haired tomboy who introduced Annie to the forbidden game of marbles

MA CHESS, Annie's maternal grandmother, who lives in Dominica

Form and Content

Annie John, originally published as a series of short stories in *The New Yorker* magazine, is the story of the title character's childhood and adolescent years in Antigua, West Indies. **The** novel is divided into eight chapters, each with its own title and internal unity of plot. Set in Antigua, these eloquent and engaging chapters chronicle Annie's confused understanding of the rift between her happy, carefree girlhood years of adulation for her mother and the power struggle and rebellion that mark Annie's transition into adolescence. The tale is told simply, with unrelenting and unapologetic candor, in the hypnotic narrative voice of a young schoolgirl. Annie presents the tension and alienation that she experiences from her mother; the separation from her friends as she outmatures them physically, academically, and emotionally; and, finally, her separation from Antigua, her island home.

Images of separation pervade each of the eight stories. In "Figures in the Distance," for example, Annie speaks about her fascination with death and dying, specifically about the deaths of Nalda, the mud eater, and of the humpbacked girl, whose hump Annie wished she had tapped to see if it was hollow. The images of the "black and white sticklike figures" bobbing in the distance in what turned out to be a cemetery, the peculiar curiosity about funeral parlors, and the compulsion at the tender age of ten to attend funerals of people she does not know seem to foreshadow Annie's wrestling for independence. This struggle that begins with simple lies to justify unexcused absences or tardiness intertwines with Annie's curiosity about separation by death.

Story after story chronicles the varying phases of Annie's physical and emotional development and her subsequent movement away from the childhood closeness that she once shared with her mother. The separation formally and abruptly announced in the summer of Annie's twelfth birthday, is recounted candidly and with the anger and overt bitterness of one who feels betrayed and rejected. Half confused, Annie notes how her mother's laughter, which was once shared fully with Annie and her father, no longer has anything to do with Annie's presence. The perfect harmony once characterized by the "circling hand" of a doting, maternal love is now transferred solely to Annie's father, who had remained somewhat peripheral in the first ten years

of Annie's life with her mother. As Annie unequivocally proclaims, "all that was finished" by the summer of her twelfth year, thus marking Annie's full initiation into adolescence. She therefore transfers her familial affections and attention to others, such as her bosom friend Gwen and the Red Girl, of whom her mother disapproves.

Thereafter, separation after separation is recorded, symbolized in the school essay that Annie writes during her first few weeks of secondary school. The two-part essay describes at once the paradisiacal union of mother and daughter and the symbolic separation by water, with the mother on the rock. Annie's recurring dream about this image leads into the final separation in the climactic and final chapter of the book: "A Walk on the Jetty." The pull away from the Edenic, prenatal world complete with a physical breakdown at age fifteen, is now complete as Annie embarks on the adult phase of her life aboard the ship that will take her away from her native Anigua to England to study nursing.

Analysis

The three most striking features about *Annie John* are its poetic language, its exploration of the sensory and the magical, and its use of dreams. To read Kincaid's prose is to experience the work of a writer who enjoys a love affair with and a manipulative power over language. The fluidity of words and images in her hand transform even the simple and ordinary into the magical. For example, the description of Annie's surreptitious relationship with an unkempt, red-haired *girl* takes on the mysterious; the details of laundry day at the John household translate into theatrical movements on a garden stage; and the graveyard scenes during recess and after school with innocent girl talk about biological endowment (or lack of it) could fill a motion-picture screen. Her fond use of litanies juxtaposed with paradoxical images creates a hypnotic, incantatory effect reminiscent of the biblical Old Testament, thus engaging the reader at a sensory level. The childlike simplicity of the narration betrays an intricate and unique style replete with repetition, echoes, and parallelism as well as a keen eye for detail described in simple images.

Even in the silence of the fabled trunk that holds the very symbols of Annie's life lies a vibrant language which Annie's mother transforms each time she engages the ritual retelling of Annie's own "before you were born" story to her early kicking in the womb, to the childhood of undifferentiated unity of mother and daughter. Kincaid's linguistic trademark, her lyrical and incantatory phrasing, is illustrated in an almost two-page inventory of Annie's trunk: diapers, booties, blanket, christening outfit, baby bottles, first and second birthday dresses, first pair of shoes, first straw hat, first straw basket, report cards, certificates, and so on. The skillful weaving of the many stories contained in this childhood trunk will empower Annie for her rebellion and her initiation into adolescence. This tradition of ritually retelling "being" stories best explains Kincaid's unabashed reference to her own mother's significant role. She calls her mother not only "the writer" of her life but also "the teller" of the story of that life. This act of retelling transformed Kincaid into a writer and initiated her into a tradition of writing to which she is at once heir and stylistic pioneer.

Because of Kincaid's preoccupation with the theme of separation, the language of the prose is necessarily allegorical. Each of the eight traditional narratives of *Annie John* is framed by images of separation, the logical movement from the innocence of childhood into the experience of adolescence. In narrative after narrative, Annie recalls and processes separations—from the more abstract separation by death she experiences afar by seeing a figure in the cemetery and watching funerals, to the personal and traumatic separation from her own mother to the gradual but natural

" falling-in-and-out -of-love' separation from adolescent friends and schoolmates and eventually to her separation from her geographic locus of Antigua.

This pervading theme of separation, which begins with a simple but significant argument about dresses and ends with walking to the jetty en route to England, is embodied in Annie's first school essay, which is a metaphor for the entire novel. Strategically located in the third chapter, appropriately entitled "Gwen," this essay recounts the primal bonding of mother and child reflected by their curative, nude swimming in the sea. It not only chronicles the despair Annie experiences with the knowledge of her identity as differentiated from her mother but also foreshadows the impending, inevitable formal separation between them and Annie's conscious and immediate need to replace her mother's love with Gwen's. It is symbolic and ironic that the very seawater in which their unity is ritualistically played out, as Annie swims clinging steadfastly to her mother's neck, is the same seawater that will eventually separate them many years later, when Annie waves goodbye to her mother's dotlike figure in the distance. The inevitability of Annie's dislocation from the harmonious mother-daughter swims of the early year is subtly symbolized in the recurrence of Annie's dreams and nightmares about being separated.

The climactic story, "A Walk on the Jetty," foreshadowed by Annie's mysterious ten-week-long illness; confirms the inevitable. The loving, story-filled "when you were born" days are irretrievably lost; Annie comes to realize this loss in some of the seemingly irrational act in which she engages during hallucinatory period of her nervous breakdown at the age of fifteen. The long and painful process that has led to "A Walk on the Jetty" culminates in the first words of the chapter: "My name is Annie John." The abstract argument about dressing alike in chapter 2 finally is now psychologically, symbolically, and physically made concrete in this single act of voiced differentiation.

Context

Many women writers of color are not averse to the idea of feminism. They are still grappling, however, with the issue of being placed in the feminist category, their writing read exclusively within the feminist protest tradition. Consciously engaging in a feminist discourse is not a choice for many of these writers. While Kincaid detests the idea of claiming to belong to, or of being categorized as belonging to, any school of writing or thought, she confesses in a 1989 interview to owing much of her success to the idea of feminism. Her writings make a major contribution to women's literature in that they examine the feminine role. By using the autobiographical first-person narrative and protagonist, Kincaid offers a voice that articulates the female coming-of-age experience.

Praised for giving new meaning to familiar things and of having a remarkable eye that sees minute details in a different light, Kincaid, along with several other women writers of color, offers new myths of female development. As she has noted in an interview, if her writing is an intensely personal, interior kind of writing, one which is characteristic of the nature of feminist discourse, it is because that is the way she could write. Indeed, her first two novels, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *Annie John*, stories about a girl and her mother, confirm Kincaid's claim that the "fertile soil" of her creative life is her mother. Even though her mother did not approve of her writing, Kincaid claims that it is indeed her mother who "wrote" her life for her and "told it" to her. In her own words, "When I write, in some things, I use my mother's voice, because I like my mother's voice. I like the way she sees things ... I feel I would have no creative life or no real interest in art without my mother."

As many women writers of color have avowed, this tradition of turning to their mothers, of "turning inside" to find their stories, has become the hallmark of their creativity. In this regard, Kincaid joins the ranks of Paule Marshall, Buchi Emecheta, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker in "searching for our mothers' gardens" (Walker) and learning from the "poets in the kitchen" (Marshall) as sources of literary creativity. In the claiming of the heritage of their "creative spark," these women writers have delineated paradigms articulating female development and success that are alternatives to the victim models of Eurocentric literary tradition.

In *Annie John*, Kincaid contributes to the storytelling tradition, an integral part of West Indian culture, particularly in her introduction of the obeah tradition. Significantly, it is in the emphasis on storytelling throughout the novel that Kincaid's belief in the power of language to transform reality is best articulated.

Sources for Further Study

Dutton, Wendy. "Merge and Separate: Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction." *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* 63, no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 406-410. An essay which argues that Kincaid's first two novels, *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, form a cohesive story. The essay is valuable more for its probing of Annie's inexplicable breakdown as a narrative or structural flaw than for its preoccupation with the coextensiveness of the two novels.

Kincaid, Jamaica. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview." Interview by Selwyn R. Cudjoe. *Callalo: An Afro-American and African Journal of Arts and Letters* 12, no. 2 (Spring, 1989): 396-411. Conducted in May and June, 1987, in North Bennington, Vermont. Kincaid discusses candidly her life and writing. The interview focuses especially on her second novel, *Annie John*, which she admits is autobiographical. Consequently, Cudjoe describes the transcription of the interview as "a valuable companion piece" to the novel.

Murdoch, H. Adlai. "Severing the (M)other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*." *Callaloo: An Afro-American and African Journal of Arts and Letters* 13, no. 2 (Spring, 1990): 325-340. A lengthy essay which investigates the separation of mother and daughter in *Annie John*. Murdoch critically examines West Indian social structures in explaining why Annie developed hatred for her mother.

Timothy, Helen Pyne. "Adolescent Rebellion and Gender Relations in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*." In *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, Mass.: Calaloux, 1990. The author focuses on the relationships between mothers and daughters in these two works.

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