

The Difficulties of Defining Identity in *Lucy*

Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* follows the life of a woman who has recently moved to the United States from the West Indies to work as an au pair for Mariah, Lewis, and their four children. While working for Mariah, Lucy grapples with events from her past as she attempts to rewrite her own history, but the past continues to follow her. While in America, Lucy observes how she is treated differently due to her race and the differences in culture compared to her homeland. Although the story discusses issues such as the effects of colonialism, class, and race differences, especially in America, the story is ultimately about loss and a desire for autonomy. The story functions as a traditional coming of age story, but deviates from the traditional arc in which the protagonists find a unique sense of identity independent from those around them. On the surface, it may appear that Lucy is acting independently of past influences in her attempt to create a new life for herself. Moving to America, refusing to reply to her mother's letters, and engaging in casual relationships can all be viewed as acts of rebellion in Lucy's journey of self discovery. Hyperfixation on this aspect of rebellion prevents readers from viewing the characters Lucy interacts with, such as Mariah, as extensions of her own identity, altering the way she perceives the world. By trying to escape her past, Lucy forms new dependencies, taking on a variety of lenses that she uses to decipher the world, but never truly faces her internal conflicts head on which ultimately results in patterns of loss and betrayal. Kincaid utilizes both the characters Lucy interacts with and physical objects to create a degree of separation between Lucy and her perception of reality, highlighting Lucy's inability to confront her internal conflict.

Throughout the novel, Mariah acts as a mother figure to Lucy in the absence of her real mother, therefore effectively becoming a person that Lucy attempts to view the world through. Despite knowing her for only a short period of time, Lucy develops a dependency and a sense of

loyalty to Mariah, feeling a sense of betrayal when disappointing her. One significant instance in which Lucy experiences these feelings of betrayal and loss is when Mariah eagerly introduces her to daffodils, but due to her past is unable to enjoy them like Mariah had hoped. “This woman who hardly knew me loved me, and she wanted me to love this thing— a grove brimming over with daffodils in bloom— that she loved also. Her eyes sank back in her head as if they were protecting themselves, as if they were taking a rest after some unexpected hard work. It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness” (Kincaid 30). The daffodils and her hatred for them are representative of Lucy’s inescapable past. In this instance, Lucy acknowledges that neither she nor Mariah are at fault for their difference in views, but there is still a feeling of guilt as if betraying Mariah, someone who supposedly loves her and resembles the role of a mother to Lucy, due to her inability to find beauty in the daffodils. In a way, Lucy is attempting to live through the eyes of Mariah as a form of escapism. Her yearning to view the daffodils, in the same way, represents both the resentment for her past and the desire to be transformed into someone new. This passage reinforces the lack of control that Lucy experiences throughout her childhood and into adulthood, although Lucy presently believes that she has greater control after moving to America. To compensate for her own feelings of confusion surrounding her identity, Lucy attaches herself to Mariah, who like a mother, introduces her to new perspectives and ways of living.

By attaching herself to Mariah, Lucy believes that she detaches herself from the influence of her real mother. As Simmons explains, “Lucy's mother, source of all intelligence, power, beauty, and magic, has been replaced by Lucy's wealthy employer, the affectionate but sheltered and naive Mariah, who proffers books on feminism to help Lucy over her deep sense of loss and

despair” (Simmons 467). Mariah exposes Lucy to new forms of media, allowing Lucy to explore her world through photography and art. Upon seeing the paintings by a man who had left his home to travel, Lucy expresses, “I don’t know if Mariah meant me to, but immediately I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven” (Kincaid 95). Through paintings and the recognition of the artist’s desires, Lucy recognizes a desire within herself that she was unable to pinpoint clearly on her own. The continuity of art and Lucy’s connection to it reveals the way in which she processes her emotions and perception of self. Similarly, Lucy describes, “Mariah had given me a book of photographs, because in the museum were some photographs I particularly liked. They were photographs of ordinary people in a countryside doing ordinary things, but for a reason that was not at all clear to me the people and the things they were doing looked extraordinary—as if these people and these things had not existed before. When I told her how much it pleased me to go and look at these pictures, she went out and bought me a book of them” (Kincaid 115). Like the paintings, the photographs provide a look into the experiences of others, offering an escape from her own reality. The photographs become an outlet by which Lucy processes her emotions that she is unable to directly manage. It is through external sources rather than voluntary introspection that Lucy truly faces her feelings surrounding her past and present. Lucy grounds herself through other people and objects.

Tangible objects throughout the novel function as symbols for Lucy’s perception of the world. As she explores photography, the physical camera lens is representative of the lens she views her surroundings. The camera lens creates a separation between Lucy and her reality which she never openly faces. It may be argued that Lucy’s interest in photography is simply a

form of pleasure that she discovers in the process of creating her “first real past – a past that was own and over which I had the final word” (Kincaid 23). Lucy’s dive into photography can be viewed as a reclamation of simple enjoyment and fun that she missed out on during her childhood. It can act as a symbol for the restoration of autonomy, but as demonstrated by her internal dialogue surrounding her mother and her childhood, Lucy is never truly free from her past’s influence. Instead, the distance created by the lens acts as a form of protection, forming an illusion of complete separation. In the same manner as the camera lens, Lucy’s avoidance of her mother’s letters represents the same type of separation. Moving to America and the physical distance between Lucy and her homeland functions in the same way. Lucy’s efforts in widening the gap between herself and her past are her attempt to redefine her identity, straying away from the loss she has faced by tangibly moving in hopes that that loss will no longer define her.

Jamaica Kincaid’s work tells a greater story about the human desire to identify with other people and the difficulties of defining oneself. Defying the idea of individuality, *Lucy* demonstrates how it is through a multitude of influences that one truly finds their identity. People desire a feeling of autonomy, but no one is truly an independent thinker. In the formation of identity, Lucy takes on parts of her mother, of Mariah, of her lovers, and of the culture that surrounds her. This search for identity is exemplified as Lucy grapples with her name, Lucy Josephine Potter. A name, something that is out of one’s control, is an integral part of identity and has the ability to tell a story. The name Josephine reveals Lucy’s mother’s hopes and desires, as she was named for a prosperous family member that later lost his riches, and the name Potter reveals the history of her family with the trauma of slavery that they endured. Growing up Lucy disliked her name and called herself other names, such as “Emily, Charlotte, Jane” after the “authoresses whose books [she] loved” (Kincaid 149). Lucy’s identification with other names

further shows the importance of external influences, whether that be the people she interacts with on a daily basis or the people that she looks up to, in defining herself. After her mother finally reveals the origins of Lucy's name, Lucy expresses, "I went from feeling burdened and old and tired to feeling light, new, clean. I was transformed from failure to triumph. It was the moment I knew who I was...I knew well the Book of Genesis, and from time to time I had been made to memorize parts of Paradise Lost. The stories of the fallen were well known to me, but I had not known that my own situation could even distantly be related to them. Lucy, a girl's name for Lucifer" (Kincaid 152). The relationship between her name and Lucifer, a character that she knows well, further emphasizes the illusion of individuality. The origin of her name brings Lucy a sense of comfort and belonging as she is able to seemingly pinpoint and define herself in relation to someone else. By viewing herself through the lens of Lucifer, Lucy overcomes the feeling of being misplaced. Her name suddenly gives her meaning and security, providing a new perspective.

Jamaica Kincaid's writing style, which includes poetic elements, serves as a device for enforcing the overarching themes of identity, loss, and betrayal. As Simmons points out, Kincaid's use of rhythmic repetition in *Lucy* has the power to both mesmerize readers and act as a symbol for developing themes (Simmons 472). Kincaid utilizes this rhythm when she writes, "I used to be nineteen; I used to live in the household of Lewis and Mariah, and I used to be the girl who took care of their four children; I used to stand over the children, four girls, at the street corner, waiting for the stoplight to change color; I used to sit in the kitchen, with the inevitable sun streaming through the window, with Mariah, drinking coffee she learned to make in France, and trying to explain to myself, by speaking Mariah, how I got to feel the way I even now feel..." (Kincaid 137). The list-like form Kincaid uses causes readers to reflect on elements of

Lucy's life that she is preparing to leave behind. The repetition of "I used to" calls back to the recurring idea of the way one's past shapes identity. The section provides a moment of reflection, revealing the way her interactions with others have become a part of her identity, but it also marks the end of an era as she leaves this lifestyle behind. Simmons writes, "Here again we see a detailed accounting of all that is soon to be left forever, as if this is a way of continuing to have those things which are one's life, even as one prepares for depart" (Simmons 472). Like the teachings of her mother and her childhood experiences which she has left behind, there is a recognition that although there is loss, these moments have contributed to Lucy's formation of identity. In a broader context, Jamaica Kincaid's writing often contains contradictions within itself as Diane Simmons highlights. Difficulty in categorizing Kincaid as a writer, reveals the many facets of a person as she is not just defined to Caribbean, Black, or feminist literature genres.

Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* explores the difficulties of defining identity. As a result of past trauma involving her mother and her colonial education, Lucy flees to America, putting physical distance between herself and the source of her issues to escape patterns of loss and betrayal. In a quest to form her own history and her own identity, Lucy relies on other people, objects, and characters to find a sense of self. Although it may seem as though Lucy is successful in gaining independence, she is never actually free from the teachings of her mother or the distress that her upbringing caused her. By simplifying Lucy's actions as part of a quest for individuality, readers may miss the broader discussion of the way external sources influence one's perception of self, becoming an amalgamation of shared ideas and experiences. Characters, such as Mariah, that Lucy interacts with act as tools for exploring the world and herself through a variety of perspectives. The presence of art throughout the novel, in the form of paintings,

literature, and photography, provides Lucy with a medium for processing her internal conflicts, revealing how humans have a natural desire to define themselves in relation to others. Jamaica Kincaid demonstrates how identity rarely contains just one facet but instead is complex and often contradictory.

Works Cited

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Simmons, Diane. "The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid." *World Literature Today*, vol. 68, no. 3, 1994, pp. 466–72. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40150359>.