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AP Literature and Composition

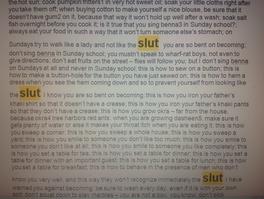
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The Roles We Women Face  
  
**Girlish, girly, girly-girl**--no matter how we put it, the term “girl” strikes up an image most of us can easily envision: Young, sweet, inexperienced, foolish, pretty and so on. Often times the connotation behind the word is playful, mirroring the very nature of female adolescence, but this image is easy to forget once a girl turns into woman. And often the playfulness after that transition is lost. [Jamaica Kincaid](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/womenwriters/kincaid_life.shtml) expresses this idea of “girlhood” and presents her version of a girl in her [short story](http://uscenglish282.blogspot.com/2010/01/girl-by-jamaica-kincaid-full-text.html) of the same name. “Girl” has a distinct style and organization that stands out and further enhances Kincaid’s overall message. The author argues that many young women are forced into overwhelming, unrealistic, and often rudimentary stereotypes related to their gender. These stereotypes are dangerous and hurtful, and it seems all too clear in her fictional narrative.

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| [[sassoferrato_virgin_mary_in_prayer_art_image1.jpg](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sassoferrato-the-virgin-in-prayer)](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sassoferrato-the-virgin-in-prayer) |
| Sassoferrato. The Virgin in Prayer. 1640-50. |

*Virgin Mary or harlot?*  
*Housewife or radical bra-burning feminist?*  
  
These two contrasts of female identity have plagued and intrigued humanity for centuries, and Kincaid doesn't shy away from these two classic female stereotypes.

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| [[les-mis-fantine.jpg](http://www.google.com/imgres?start=98&um=1&sa=X&hl=en&biw=1280&bih=598&tbm=isch&tbnid=N9di3e0yw_N6yM:&imgrefurl=http://entirelyopinionated.com/2013/01/les-miserables-and-imax/&docid=lCzOEuE7m9Ah1M&imgurl=http://i0.wp.com/entirelyopinionated.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/les-mis-fantine.jpg?resize%3D392%2C392&w=392&h=392&ei=Vo_IUZW-C8rIqwHbnoDoBQ&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=500&page=5&tbnh=149&tbnw=158&ndsp=29&ved=1t:429,r:18,s:100,i:58&tx=72&ty=85)](http://www.google.com/imgres?start=98&um=1&sa=X&hl=en&biw=1280&bih=598&tbm=isch&tbnid=N9di3e0yw_N6yM:&imgrefurl=http://entirelyopinionated.com/2013/01/les-miserables-and-imax/&docid=lCzOEuE7m9Ah1M&imgurl=http://i0.wp.com/entirelyopinionated.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/les-mis-fantine.jpg%253Fresize%253D392%25252C392&w=392&h=392&ei=Vo_IUZW-C8rIqwHbnoDoBQ&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=500&page=5&tbnh=149&tbnw=158&ndsp=29&ved=1t:429,r:18,s:100,i:58&tx=72&ty=85) |
| Fantine from Les Miserables. 2012. |

She hits on the idea of the domestic woman heavily by including a series of commands for her main character throughout her entire story; the “girl” is ordered to, “wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry (1). The reader is struck by images of laundry in the very first line—and laundry is often considered a woman’s domain, and a woman’s responsibility, especially when it comes to the homestead. Kincaid’s further explores this stereotype of the housewife with other chores related to setting the table, ironing, and cooking throughout the rest of her short story.  
  
Ultimately, Kincaid reveals that this stereotype of a woman as the housewife is depressing, harmful, and overwhelming. The girl is given order after order, and Kincaid mimics that brilliantly with her syntax and organization. This entire story is essentially one long list, and one long sentence—just like some domestic women’s lives. While some women may enjoy this industrious lifestyle, it is clear the main character does not. As the "girl" is given command after command, she tries, unsuccessfully, to say something but is overrun by other instructions. She is asked, “is it true that you sing benna is Sunday school?” (1) and the girl tries to answer, “but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school” (1); however, the irony is her response is said much later—after two more orders are given about to “wharf-rat boys” and eating “fruits on the street” (1). It seems apparent the “girl” is not heard, and her voice is drowned out by the endless series of directions that Kincaid prescribes (see the following [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiGNbk9PMq0) for an interesting audio reading and visualization of this story). In the end, it is clear—the syntax, the repetition, the tremendous multitude of domestic orders—this domestic label is dangerous: it takes over the young girl’s voice and identity.  
  
Kincaid also explores the traditional conflict of women as being chastely vessels or dangerously flirting with promiscuity:  
  
*So is this “girl” the “Virgin Mary” or a “harlot?”*  
  
It appears she dangerously teetering towards harlotry. One of Kincaid’s strongest diction choices, [“slut,”](http://etymonline.com/?term=slut)reveals how the main character is facing one of the worst female typecasts. The “girl” is given several instances of how she can be classified as a slut including, “how to hem a dress” (1) in order to prevent becoming the “slut you are so bent on becoming” (1). The way the sentence is said—a declarative statement, and one that is repeated **three times in the story**—reveals Kincaid’s tone towards this stereotypical word: it is overused, offensive, and wrong. The girl is faced with one of society’s worst judgments—sexual prejudice.



*It is one thing to have a random person to call you a "slut," but what if that someone you love, your own flesh and blood?*  
  
Consider Kincaid's unnamed speaker. The persona reads like a female--probably the girl's mother because one of the orders the persona gives is, "how to iron your father's shorts" (1). When it comes down to gender stereotypes, most people believe that these stereotypes are perpetuated by the opposite genders, so males to females, and vice-versa, but in this instance you see the contrary--it is a woman belittling one of her own. That is one of Kincaid's greatest twists, and most unexpected arguments: stereotypes like this that plague women can be reinforced other women. What's worse, is this stereotype is being presented by someone that is suppose to be trusting, caring, and unbiased; you see a mother is doing this to her own daughter. By the end of the story you have seen Kincaid explore two distinct, but well known stereotypes, and you have also seen her explore ***who*** perpetuates those stereotypes. In the end, those stereotypes can be a plague brought on by the people you would least expect.  
  
Kincaid is clearly a voice for all women, and although her story has distinct colloquialism that reminds us of geography far away from America, her messages still apply to the whole world. Many women will face these moments of prejudice—what identity will they have to choose? What identity will they mistakenly be classified in? Kincaid challenges this stereotypes, but we know the female identity has been labeled so much more than just a "housewife" or a "slut." Regardless of the label, it is wrong, especially when it is aimed towards a child, or a "girl," and the damage can be see in Kincaid's very short, very simple, but incredibly overwhelming short story. 

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Reactions/Reflections: