Jamaica Kincaid's “Girl”;
The Semicolon's Attempt to Connect Reader and Story

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This paper was for Dr. Robert Milner's Short Story class. The author defends the semi-colon and explains its significance in creative and academic writing.

“What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me?” —Jamaica Kincaid

A generation reveals their deepest inner self and their true identity in the stories it writes. It is in the written form that the future generation will label its longings, obsessions, and passions. The inventions of the past may only serve as machinated devices but will not expose the core reality of a human condition that persists in their time. The paintings and songs, in retrospect, may invoke certain responses and connections, but will not truly convey the fundamental desire and the very crux that drive the past generation. It is in the written form, where disclosure of the past is documented, that a semblance of reality and a clear image is painted. These written forms are often in narratives. These narratives are transcribed, persisting ideas and social issues of the day. Often, a writer will reveal the inner workings of society through these narratives, and fictionalized or not, a close scrutiny of the stories they tell will show the context of a past era.

A story will reveal the writer and her idea of the world. She will expose herself in her work and if the reader is paying attention, she will lay bare “secrets” of her thoughts and attitudes towards the world. These “secrets” do not necessarily mean the deepest darkest monstrosities that she shoots out to the world, or of a haunting of Freudian childhood atrocities. Sometimes, they are as simple and as straightforward as one's longing for the loss of culture; to Jamaica Kincaid, this is precisely the reason why she wrote “Girl.”

In the story, Kincaid presents her mastery of her own culture. She has carefully crafted this knowledge and has precisely weaves this idea in “Girl”. The story's charm comes from the narrative of a young girl who is seeking to form her identity through the many commands she remembers from her mother. Kincaid carves into the American literature the image of a girl, foreign, in contrast to the regular American girl. The author relives in this story her own experiences with her mother and looks back into her former self. The story's form is both exploratory and experimental at the time it was written. It is the author's attempt to negotiate her past identity with the brilliant writer she has become. By writing and publishing this story, Kincaid presents to us, the readers, a portrait of herself and seeks to attempt a connection between herself and the world.

It is relatively easy for the present generation to take a photograph. By clicking a few buttons, uploading, downloading, and photoshopping, a picture can easily be posted on profiles and walls in social
networking sites. People can now judge others by clicking that picture and determine what characteristics one has just by the pose. A puckered mouth, dark eyeliners, low cut blouses—these are what some quantifiers that others are judged by. In contrast, writing a comprehensive self-evaluation and description stumps many young people today. There is a lost sense of realistic gauge on who people are at present. Presentation and the external life are the only things that matter in telling the stories of this generation.

A photograph will only communicate a superficial image and "compel the reader to enstory" (Shwalbe 178) or evaluate the other person. Easily, a photograph can "pose" an emotion, a candid moment, and create a kind of superfluousness that passes for reality. In a story however, it does the exact opposite. The careful placement of words, and the creative, artistic use of language forces the reader to make-up the images in his imaginations. The experience of reading a story versus looking at the photo becomes two extreme opposite experiences. A story allows him to step into a visceral space without physically being there. This physicality is used by Kincaid in the writing of this story. Kincaid uses the words such as "stone heaps" (Kincaid 475) as a tool to wash clothes.

This concrete description brings the sound of a river's rushing waters, the warm atmosphere of a tropical, humid environment, and the noise coming from the chit chat of local women sitting on rocks while washing their laundry. The impact of this concreteness becomes participative and the reader's psychic distance with the story contracts. The weaving of detailed words in Kincaid's story allows the readers an experience which is only and exclusively imparted through words.

Words when connected form sentences; sentences attempt to convey an idea. Kincaid has used words to her advantage in this story. Beyond words, her sentence construction also shows, her playfulness and attempt to break certain "norms" in grammar rules. It is safe to say that in grammar, the over use of a punctuation mark may mean that there is little skill and thought in putting an idea together. In a story however, the absence of punctuation leads to confusion and cumbersome reading. Authors in general often use punctuations as part of "the" proper grammatical form. Kincaid uses one particular punctuation to set a mentality of "see how far the envelope can be pushed" and to set her story above the average.

Her use also invites the reader to pay close attention to the many, over-indulgent details she wrote in the story. She has used the semicolon 51 times in "Girl"; this is within a piece of writing that is only 49 lines long. Generally, 51 occurrences is not much in a seven page thesis or a book length dissertation; in one that is barely a page and a half, this is really significant.

The semicolon is a weird punctuation. "The semicolon provides a stronger break than a comma, and a weaker break than a period" (Venolia 85). In its average use, it is a grammatical device. As a reader, one could not help but question the motivation why the author used the semicolon like it was going out of style. At initial reading, it feels like an over extravagance of photography editing techniques that deem a picture grainy.

One should not dismiss the use as mere fancy or whim though; the author peppered semicolon into her work intentionally. To
understand this seeming lunacy in the writing of the story, one must have a clear understanding of the meaning behind the semicolon. In academic settings, this is probably the most hated punctuation, not for the sake of prejudice alone, but more to the growing reality that grammatical training in the present is lacking. The semicolon is often the most ridiculed, underestimated, and discriminated punctuation in punctuation-landia.

To understand Kincaid, a clear view of the histories and usage of the semicolon must be established. The basic utilitarian reason is to connect ideas. Kincaid found a way to connect her ideas in a way that the reader will not breathe a full inhale/exhale count until she presents her whole idea. Kincaid successfully exploited this out-of-breath theory by: “don’t walk bareheaded in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in oil”. The key word here is hot. Two different images with one theme, heat; these two smaller ideas connected by a slight pause suggests that the author wants the reader to experience the constricting breathlessness of being in an extremely hot environment. The line also conveys the stickiness, mashed with the feeling of being “cooked” under the sun like fritters. In closer inspection of the story, each idea separated by a semicolon is somehow connected to one theme, and the mixtures of interrelated themes make up for the message of her story—culture.

For the seriousness of the story’s message—it is the life-long to do list that the girl chants to herself like a brainwashed robot—one cannot help but find humor in the images presented by the author. This humor will not have the same impact without the semicolon. In the use of this punctuation, her playfulness is brilliantly played out in the story. Arthur Plotnik suggests that semicolons can be the punctuation that delivers the punchline; Kincaid crafts the story like the script in a stand-up comedy routine which when read out loud, introduces a rolling punchline one after another.

Just when the reader expects something serious after reading “this is how you behave in the presence of men who don’t know you well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming”, she immediately presents something so ordinary and outright ridiculous with: “be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit”. The visual acuity these two ideas bring are just phenomenal. The reader cannot help but laugh at the image of a girl who may “like” a strange guy, thus wanting to flirt with him but at the same time dutifully obeying her dominant mother by spitting on herself.

The funny parts in the story are cleverly hidden in plain sight and are partially covered by the overabundance of the semicolon. When a reader gets hooked and labors to unearth the different ideas in the story or is going to get a failing grade in a class if he does not, the semicolon has a sinister goal to win anyone. Grammarians believe that a semicolon creates expectations in a sentence. In the mother-daughter tension presented in the story, Kincaid uses the mother figure to command the girl and “expect” her to shy away from slutishness.

It can also be assumed that Kincaid uses this punctuation to play with the reader some. Josephine Burnham, from the University of Kansas, says that in cases where two ideas need to bridge together and no other punctuation works, the semicolon becomes the mark of subordination—a
"paratactic construction" (536). Kincaid cleverly uses her story as a kind of subordination directed to the reader—an indoctrination of her culture to the reader, of her familiar domesticity introduced to a foreign culture. She subjects her reader to a type of semicolon. The story becomes the hypothetical semicolon between writer and reader; the story forms the slight pause and connection between the two.

Many believe, and as much as people detest its use, the semicolon is a dying punctuation. Its rarity in use and its exclusivity in visitations within writerly, creative groups, makes this punctuation so marginalized. One could not help but ask why Kincaid would resort to a vanishing symbol in her sentence structures. Perhaps, the heavy manipulation is trying to prove a point. Kincaid is trying to drive home the idea that her identity is dying and during the short pauses in her life, the author requires a solid, constant cadence of litanies; the writing of this story is essential to remind her of who she really is. Or, one can only assume, that Kincaid is obsessed with the symbol of a dot on top of a comma. Nevertheless, the heavy use of it brings to reader a powerful visual impact on the count of randomly leafing through a book and garnering interest by odd formatting alone. The reader may not exactly quote the story verbatim, but its claim to fame is its number of semicolons.

For as much as this story is widely anthologized, its inclusion to the lists of frequently read stories plays a disadvantage to the reader. The experience of culture becomes limited to the author's frame of mind. The construction of place becomes romanticized, unchanging, and fabricated. In the same way, Yi-Fu Tuan puts it in the article, "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach": speech transforms nature into a human place (688), also, transcribed narratives becomes the preservation of a cultural place. Kincaid offers a place in her story that cannot exist in real time. The disadvantage to the reader is that they are allowed only a limited perception of place whereas, life is always changing and evolving. The advantage though, exceeds any personal travels, colorful brochures, and inviting travelogue videos to the place.

When Kincaid finally connects with the reader, her experiences become part of the reader's. When the connection is formed, visiting the locale only adds to the elaborate and lush experience—reader brings his own emotional idea of the place—which deepens his intimacy with his excursions as it all becomes a complex mixture of ideas and tangibility. This only proves that the writing of the story is still needed: to install and evoke pictures into the imagination and reading them becomes the vehicle for literacy and completeness of experience. Kincaid could have easily lost her identity in the process of immigration, but in writing "Girl" she has formed that connection/semicolon to her past and present self. The semicolon has become the negotiating element in the wholeness of her identity.

In the end, if people read only for entertainment, they will enjoy a few minutes of suspending unbelief. The pleasure of the text is an experience exclusive to itself: adapted, spoken, scripted into movies, read out loud but still irreplaceable. If the writer writes with excellent craftsmanship; if the story brings the readers into a world that could only exist on paper: if the punctuation becomes the vehicle to present the ideas, he has written well.
Overall, when a well-written narrative is presented to the reader, the story becomes part of who they are, unwittingly, their cultures will evolve. The reader is enriched; she will pay careful attention to the details; and may be summoned to write her own. If one decides to write, she will do it writing in her social context, personal belief, generational attitudes. She will make use of symbols, words, sentences, ideas—and in exceptional cases, a semicolon.

Works Cited


