Style in Jamaica Kincaid’s “The Letter from Home:” Between Adoption and Adaptation

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Abstract

It is the aim of this paper to examine the way in which the adopted style and the implied symbols in Jamaica Kincaid’s “The Letter from Home” are adapted not only for the purpose of subversion, but also for the aim of reflecting the politics of resistance to external powers, eminent in the text. In her one-sentence short story, Kincaid amalgamates between two different writing styles that are governed by the utilization of distinct syntactic structures and a peculiar use of punctuation, which reflect the divergent speaking voices as filtered through the protagonist’s consciousness. Primarily a stream-of-consciousness narrative, “The Letter from Home” communicates two disparate worlds that are marked by the stylistic differentiation of voices. Countering her mother’s simplistic sentences, a cryptic recitation of rustic women’s daily chores, which is basically a mundane description of the limitations of the female reductionist world; the daughter’s more complex sentences in terms of both structure and content are a rejection of everydayness and domesticity and an attempt to overthrow and subvert hierarchical gendered roles that obliterate women’s intellectual potential. A celebration of individuality, Kincaid’s short story centralizes the power of thought which grants the protagonist resistance to given and monolithic institutions, namely religion and colonialism.

Keywords: Adopted, adapted, resistance, stylistic differentiation, subvert, individuality.
Introduction:

Historically speaking, the concept of ‘fiction’ has undergone fundamental changes, which—together—mark its evolution. With “the ensuing establishment of periodical literature, the tradition of short stories [that are] produced in collections of linked episodes ultimately evolved” (Gelfant and Graver 9). The conventional practice consists in independently publishing self-sufficient constituents which still collectively “serve as a part of a volume unified by a continuing setting, or ongoing characters, or developing themes, or coalescent patterns of imagery” (Gelfant and Graver 9). It is within such writing tradition that Jamaica Kincaid produced her 1983 collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River*. Her work reflects not only a subtle experimentation with, but also a resonant celebration of a confluence of styles, as it epitomizes the correlation between the adoption of a given style and its adaptation to fulfill a certain agenda. Indeed, in the sixth short story in this collection, “The Letter from Home,” Kincaid seems to strategically combine the how and the what. Its “allusive narrative structure and ‘mythopoetic language’” (Gelfant and Graver 315) posits it as an exemplar of stylistic variation that is deployed to signal the divergent speaking voices as filtered through the protagonist’s consciousness. “The Letter from Home” thus underscores Kincaid’s dissention with the limitations of the female world and her subsequent attempt to subvert hierarchical gendered roles that obliterate women’s intellectual potential. A celebration of individuality, Kincaid’s short story centralizes the power of thought which grants the protagonist resistance to given and monolithic institutions, namely religion and colonialism.

1) “The Letter from Home” as an Unconventional Writing: Stylistic Deviation:

At first glance, “The Letter from Home,” which is basically a one-sentence, an almost three-page long piece of writing could be mistaken not to be a short story. A highly polyphonic single periodic sentence, it communicates one long thought that is occasionally fragmented—yet, uninterrupted—by punctuation, with the sole full stop placed at the very end. Essentially “a series of dependent and independent clauses separated by semicolons” (Werlock 280), the piece of writing is deemed to “exemplify[ ] Kincaid’s preference to articulate concerns through a polyphonic speaker, often in dialogue” (Ferguson 20). It is for this reason that critics like Jane Wong emphasize the labyrinthine aspect of a Kincaid sentence, as it implies a conspicuously measured refusal of breakage. Such resistance to dissection can be related to the question of perspective, for the entire narrative is filtered through a single character’s consciousness. Accordingly, the consistency of the narrative emanates from imagistic successions, as “one image transforms into another, just as one feeling sparks other emotions” (Edwards 30)—which accounts for the non-traditional punctuation. Kincaid’s disregard of conventions in relation to questions of length, size, punctuation, and lack of capitalization and paragraphing is a marker of the work’s strategic deviational aspect, which elucidates the author’s optional self-effacement (Golden 11).

As the work’s title insinuates, the text is believed to be “constructed around a series of epistles from home” (Edwards 29). Dubbed “an epistolary monologue” (Ferguson 20), the first-person narrative initiates with a series of simple declarative statements that introduce the gist of a letter sent by a mother from home to her migrant daughter. Implicitly introduced, the question of geographical distance is presented through *allusions* to dissimilar components of two divergent milieus. A simplistic rural setting where “the cat meowed, the dog barked, the horse neighed, the mouse squeaked, the fly buzzed” (Kincaid 37) is set in opposition to a more complicated urban location. Facets of modernity are embodied in a second, more...
luxurious lifestyle, characterized by the availability of fridges, gas, cars, in addition to a more sophisticated architecture.

Kincaid’s use of various imageries to emphasize the notion of “disparateness” is further consolidated through the image of “the tree branches heavy with snow crash[ing] against the roof” (Kincaid 37). Snow, an indicator of a cold climate as experienced by the daughter, is antagonized with the mother’s account of the buzzing fly image, which is a sign of a milder and warmer climate. It is this kind of “play with [...] references [that] redirects attention from the level of semantics to the level of rhetoric and in this way creates a space of new meanings” (Purk 2) for Kincaid.

However, “play with references” is not the only stylistic stratagem adopted by Kincaid to distinguish between the two speakers, for with the same intention; she also experiments with the syntactic norms of the English language. The short story’s opening telegraphic sentences introduce a litany of actions that range from milking the cows to dressing the children, a kind of checklist of a typical day for a rustic woman. This survey of the mundane, embodied in “the incantatory recitation of a woman’s daily chores” (Paravisini-Gebert 68), creates a rhythm through the four-syllabic sentence structure, a rhythm that resonates with monotony—which reflects the menacing aspect of such reductive gendered role division on female subjectivity. The jeopardizing hegemony of such lifestyle is highlighted through the sentences’ failure to transcend the superficiality of the communicated content, as they imply intentional obliteration of the speaker’s emotions and thoughts. Yet, what is alarming is the mother’s inability to perceive the hazardous implications of acquiescing to such “everydayness and domesticity” (Paravisini-Gebert 68). Instead, it is the daughter who entertains a level of awareness about similar pervasive phenomena.

The daughter’s discomfort with familiarity is reflected in her feelings of anxiety resultant from the recollection of the mother’s hegemonic epistles, since the opening passage is a representation of “the mother’s litany [as] filtered through the daughter’s consciousness” (Werlock 280). Although the pace of “The Letter from Home” starts “softly with milking cows and churning butter, [its] prose moves rapidly to a greater order of intensity, antinomies and surreal elements,” (Ferguson 20) in accordance with the daughter’s psychological state and mental activity. The mere reminiscence of the contents of her mother’s letters causes the daughter feelings of utter discomfort as they “inevitably spark memories and emotions that [she] is trying to forget” (Edwards 29). Her much-sought forgetfulness about a home she has left behind is constantly aborted by her mother’s letters which serve as a connective link with her homeland. However, upon remembering her mother’s unappealing account of her daily life, “[the daughter’s] heart beat loudly thud! thud! tiny beads of water gathered on [her] nose” (Kincaid 37): signs of panic and the byproduct of her displeasure with the haunting motherly presence.

However, despite her failure to assert her self at the beginning of the short story under the weight of the mother’s suppressive and oppressive authoritative “I,” the daughter manages to voice her dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed on female existence. It is in those instances where there is a sudden shift as sentences become more complex, foregrounding a surreal depiction of the environment that a second speaking voice –that is, the daughter’s– is distinguished. Indeed, the first speaking voice’s statements “can be readily distinguished from those sentences focusing on the receiver of the letter, which are longer and more complex in structure and describe her as engaging with her surroundings in a more vital way” (Paravisini-Gebert 68). Unlike the mother, the daughter amalgamates between not only various sentence structures—whether short, telegraphic, or long, – but also different sentence
patterns—namely declarative, exclamative, and interrogative. Such conglomeration is employed by Kincaid to emphasize the daughter’s active interaction with her surroundings, for she totally disregards the mundane and focuses on actively observing her environment.

The principle of sensory impression, expressed in imagistic forms, governs the daughter’s surveillance of her milieu. Such principle relates “to those processes and structures within an organism that receive stimuli from the environment and convey them to the brain” (Reverso Dictionary). The daughter’s act of monitoring her surroundings—whether a cat licking its coat or a drawer that refuses to close—stimulates her thoughts. In her account of the daughter’s observations, Kincaid employs what Jane Wong terms the zoom-focus technique which signals change of perspective from familiarity to unfamiliarity, from the mundane to the surreal; for “the constant zooming always felt metaphysical which is another way in which Kincaid measures the mundane with the extraordinary” (Wong, “Art of the Sentence: Jamaica Kincaid”).

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The sudden zoom-ins and zoom-outs relate to questions of movement and pace. “The external objects or inner thoughts,” as presented in the short story, then “follow the principles of cinematic presentation of panoramic views, slow-ups, close-ups and a series of views in rapid succession” or simply the principle of montage (Golden 12). Useful in “showing physical movement of a character and the quality and rate of psychic activity,” (Golden 14) the principle of montage—as employed by Kincaid—suggests the accelerated pace at which the daughter’s thoughts unfold.

As delineated, the narrator’s mental activity is bound by the principle of free association which is basically “the psychological process by which a character’s consciousness simply drifts from one thing to another because of some random connection between them” (Golden 13-4). The daughter’s consciousness seems to jump uncontrollably from filtering the contents of her mother’s letters, to observing her surroundings, to concentrating on minute details in a closed spatial setting, to finally brood on existential and historical matters. In the case of “The Letter from Home,” the principle of free association not only unravels the implicit “movement of the psyche in response to a particular thought,” but “also indicate[s] physical movement of the character [of the daughter], responding to external stimuli” (Golden 14).

The rapid succession of images that disregards questions of logicality, which is conditioned by the principle of free association, is presented in a way that negates any forms of mediation. In other words, the way in which the contents of “The Letter from Home” are disclosed does not suggest the existence of a narrative voice that is responsible for introducing the story world. It rather unfolds in a manner that insinuates an imitation of a not-yet voiced thought, considering its disregard of “both formal syntax and logical thought progression” (Macauley 88). Consequently, a piece of writing with such characteristics “captures thought units as they seem to originate within the character’s consciousness rather than as they would be deliberately expressed” (Humphrey 23) (emphasis added). It is for the purpose of providing “a direct quotation of the [human] mind not merely of the language area but of the whole consciousness” (Kumar & McKeon 346) that Kincaid chooses to disfavor logicality and selectivity. Instead, she adheres to the afore-mentioned principle of free association to evidence her concern with the prespeech, preconscious level in an attempt “to capture for the reader the atmosphere of the mind” (Edel 7).
2) Symbolism and the Question of Narrative Unity:

In her *Stream of Consciousness Technique: The most Impressive Innovation in Modern Literature*, Mirjana Lončar-Vujnović sets three factors shaping free association, namely memory as its basis; senses which is its guide; and imagination—embodied in the use of symbolism—as that which determines its elasticity. Similarly, while Dorothy O. Golden centralizes the paramount importance of symbols with regard to free association since they substitute for rationally formulated ideas and, thus, “form patterns of cross-references as a structural framework” (Golden 14); Melvin Friedman stresses their role in establishing the narrative’s unity through constant referencing. Accordingly, the sections of literary texts that are molded in a similar fashion to “The Letter from Home” are “knit together mainly by such methods of continual cross reference of symbol and image” (Friedman 24), rather than “by the process of action” (Golden 9).

In “The Letter from Home,” Kincaid often refers to symbols which, in one way or another, relate back to the daughter as she represents the primary consciousness through which the entire narrative is filtered. The text’s narrative skeleton not only has the mother’s letter from home as its axis, but also unravels the daughter’s subsequent feelings of anxiety and agitation as well as her sense of disorientation to be its driving force. The psychological disturbance that she experiences is conveyed through the use of imagery and onomatopoeia to provide detailed accounts of both the visual and aural pictures. This helps the reader peek into the internal workings of the daughter’s psychological and emotional processes, foreshadowing the looming state of panic. Recalling her discontent with a fate that is similar to her mother’s and to that of all the women she has left behind to struggle under the weight of a patriarchal society, she opts for “shed[ding] her skin” (Kincaid 37). The text’s opening examination of everyday activities then quickly “presses toward shape-shifting as the speaker envisions herself shedding her skin” (Paravisini-Gebert 46).

There appears to be a great deal of controversy concerning the implications as well as the historical roots of skin-shedding. For instance, in her 1995 *Haiti, History and the Gods*, Joan Dayan describes skin-shedding to be traditionally perceived as “the trait of monstrous being” (265). She asserts that folktales which foreground mythical creatures, whose very existence is conditioned by the act of shedding their skin, are abstracted revivals of a history of enslavement, during the times when slaves had their skins excoriated and applied “with pepper, salt, lemon and ashes” (Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* 265). Despite emphasizing the interconnectedness between culture and skin-shedding, Moira Ferguson holds a dissimilar conception of the significance of the act, since she avers that “a woman who removes her skin is an enactment of a voodoo priestess’s spiritual ritual” (11). In other words, unlike Dayan, Ferguson proposes a positive understanding of the act of shedding one’s skin, as it is reminiscent of the powerful spirituality of female voodoo practitioners. She, therefore, emphasizes skin-shedding inasmuch as it has its origins in African spiritual practices such as voodoo and Obeah.

In their examination of the symbolic employment of skin-shedding in Kincaid’s fiction, Moira Ferguson and Jana Evans Braziel claim that it is suggestive of the figure of “the jablesse,” a positive symbol that often disseminates the author’s works. However, as a folkloric mythical creature, the jablesse does not entertain the ability to shed her skin, as she is “[t]raditionally speaking […] a beautiful woman with one goat’s hoof who lures the unsuspecting to their death” (Gelfant and Graver 318). Her power does not exceed the mere act of luring men to their own demise using her deceitfully-beautiful face. It is rather the
Soucouyant, another equally fundamental symbol from the Caribbean folkloric tradition of storytelling that Kincaid deploys, who is strongly associated with shape-shifting.

Indeed, “the soucouyant, a vampire, also called ‘Ol’ Higue,’ can change into different forms, shedding human skin at night […]” (Murray 4). Ivette Romero-Cesareo contends that “soucouyant” is a word of African origins which literally means “human beings transformed into balls of fire” (265). Within the African and Caribbean oral traditions, the term designates an old woman who “suck[s] people’s blood […]” and whose peculiar power is “either inherited or acquired through a pact with the devil” (Romero-Cesareo 265). Caribbean folktales, generally addressed to little children for the purpose of entertainment that is mixed with education, tell about this elderly woman who often isolates herself from other members of the community. She is depicted as either “chasing people from her yard or sleeping the day away,” only to “emerge from her skin at night, become a ball of flame, and plague her community by drinking people’s blood –sometimes straight from the hearts” (Anatol 1).

As folk stories get often reworked, some of their core elements are open to alterations. A new interpretation of the soucouyant “that goes beyond the ‘monstrous’ demon who merely ‘confounds the natural order of things’ (Dayan, Haiti, History, and the Gods 265) for instance arose in this manner. In her book, The Things that Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in the Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora, Giselle Liza Anatol explains that since the soucouyant tales are passed down on a generational basis, its implications altered to a considerable extent due to the question of gradual temporal distance from the times of slavery. In other words, although “the fright associated with the peeling of the skin as well as the drawing of blood from another person remains,” (Anatol 9) the perception by which skin-shedding has been long perceived as “evil” and negative has drastically transformed. Consequently, the soucouyant’s act of shedding her skin now translates into an action that conjures notions such as agency and power, rather than submissiveness and powerlessness. Anatol argues that the Soucouyant is, therefore, no longer frightful as a reified monstrous being that is skinned alive by an external force, whose vicious whip drains her blood. Instead, she is dreadful “because she can strip off her own skin and penetrate the skins of others; she is also the one who draws blood, not leaks it. She is a powerful actor, not acted upon” (Anatol 9).

In “The Letter from Home,” the figure of the soucouyant is representative of the daughter’s willful abandonment of an identity that had been readily given, an identity that had been tainted with the Father’s teachings and the Mother’s ideologized advice. It is a marker of resistance to the mother’s implied assumption that “the girl’s destiny, like hers, is to become part of the discourse of provisional domestic independence within patriarchal domination” (MacDonald-Smythe 116). The daughter’s outspoken dissent with an analogous fate compels her to give up her old self. She, therefore, sheds her skin, which allows her the “free[dom] to go anywhere” (MacDonald-Smythe 36) and so, “the boat sailed, the waves broke, the horizon tipped, the jetty grew small, the air stung, some heads bobbed, some handkerchiefs fluttered” (Kincaid 37-8).

The inexplicit reference to the actual departure for another land echoes the daughter’s quest for a constructed identity. The concept of “the journey” with the purpose of seeking a new identity, along with the idea of geographical displacement as offering the ultimate opportunity “to see the world” with its implied educational outcomes; bear references to the Bildungsroman writing tradition. Indeed, with the German word “bildung” meaning “formation” (Dictionary.com) and the tradition’s centralization of the process of emotional
and psychological growth, “The Letter from Home” epitomizes such concerns through the character of the soucouyant daughter.

The daughter’s destination offers her a fertile ground for learning which is reflected in her lively interaction with her surroundings. What is characteristic of Kincaid’s stylized writing is the lack of explicit references to questions of temporality when it comes to the narrative account of the daughter’s learning process. The narrative account of the daughter’s gradual growth seems to obey the principle of “variable chronology” which is basically founded on a temporal deviation from chronological sequence – as conditioned by the filtering consciousness. Accordingly, depending on the consciousness being presented, “this variation may involve compression or expansion or one time may be superimposed upon another, or there may be side digression, forward movement into the future, or memory within memory” (Golden 14). As Dorothy O. Golden asserts, such disregard of temporal chronology is only made possible in the case of inner time which “contrasts sharply with external or temporal time” – with “the contrast [being] a valuable means of depicting the flow of consciousness activity” (14).

The process of identity construction is delineated inasmuch as it is filtered through the daughter’s consciousness. Consequently, its textual encoding is inferred through the abundant use of successive imageries, reflecting the instantaneous accumulative recollection of a considerable time period in the life of an auto-didact. The daughter’s journey is reminiscent of that of the soucouyant. Indeed, upon shedding her skin, she departs for a new place, in an attempt to escape a restrictive environment. In the new setting, she broods over how “there was a night, it was dark, there was a moon, it was full, there was a bed, it held sleep; there was movement, it was quick, there was a being, it stood still, there was a space” (Kincaid 38) (emphasis added). The associative link between “night,” “darkness” and the full “moon” finds legitimacy inasmuch as the distinct elements collectively relate back to the figure of “the soucouyant”. A creature that belongs to the night, the soucouyant usually roams in the darkness to pursue its preys. Unlike the actual soucouyant, however, the daughter’s endeavor transcends the instinctive thirst for blood, as it rather revolves around establishing an independent sense of self. It is, therefore, only strategic that the soucouyant daughter stands still instead of sucking the sleeper’s blood – something the traditional vampiric soucouyant would have done.

What is problematic in this pictorial passage, however, is the sense of fullness that is soon to be juxtaposed with a sense of nothingness, for “there was space, it was full” and “then there was nothing” (Kincaid 38). The two antagonistic mental images are symbolic of the way in which displacement triggered the daughter’s subsequent feelings of loss upon realizing the invalidity of her repertoire in her new environment, which stimulated her interest in total self-redefinition. In other words, the cultural specificities of the daughter’s homeland have proven to be inoperative in the new dissimilar milieu. Her epiphanic moment is portrayed through the act of “light[ing] a candle” (Kincaid 38), with both elements bearing references to illumination, thus knowledge. After the total dissolution of her skin (Kincaid 38) which is representative of absolute rejection of the old self, “[she] saw something move, [she] recognized the shadow to be [her] own hand,” to ultimately feel herself “to be one thing” (Kincaid 38). This gradual progression from seeing an unidentified shape in motion, to distinguishing a hand, to reaching ultimate completion is reminiscent of an individual in the making. The final outcome of this process is the daughter’s successful construction of her own identity, independently from her domineering mother.
It is in that passage where change from one consciousness to another is detected that the reader is able to distinguish a different portrayal of the daughter’s self. The shift in the “level of consciousness [and] quality of thought” (Golden 15) is signaled by mechanical aids, namely the use of parentheses and presence – rather than lack– of standard capitalization and conventional punctuation. The rhetorical questions that are provided in the form of interrogative statements, engulfed between parentheses, represent a series of metaphysical and religious enquiries, which, in turn, mirror the daughter’s intellectual growth. Entertaining a mind of her own, she wonders: “Is the Heaven to be above? Is the Hell below? Does the Lamb still lie meek? Does the Lion roar?” (Kincaid 38). Although these concepts find legitimacy in the Christian canon, for they are intertextual instances with the Bible, Kincaid employs them as symbols to denote the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized. Indeed, the expressions “Lamb of God” and “Lion-like Lamb” are used in the afore-mentioned biblical books as allusions to Jesus. However, in “The Letter from Home,” the Lamb who lies meek suggests the image of the scapegoat who is subject to punishment for the sins of others without their knowledge and beyond their will, thus the vanquished. In contrast, bearing in mind that the Messiah was dubbed the Lion-like lamb in reference to his rising to deliver victory, the roaring Lion symbol translates into an embodiment of the vanquisher. Yet, the interrogative form of the statements conveys the speaker’s questioning of the persistence of these supposedly sacred colonial hierarchies.

However, the girl acknowledges that colonialism still lurks, for “in the peninsula some ancient ships are still anchored” (Kincaid 38). The contradictory aspect of the sentence which is manifest in the allusion to a distant historical event, namely Christopher Columbus’ arrival in 1493 through the image of “the ancient ships” using the present tense implies the timeline of the occurrence. Nonetheless, the presented conception of the still-ongoing colonialism is not to be acquainted with direct imperialist rule, but rather with the hegemonic infiltration of the European cultural and religious codes into the national culture.

The image of the leopard stalking its prey in the village, which is recalling of an African milieu, is set in opposition with an entirely disparate setting defined by the European etiquette and the Christian divine order of things. A tribal milieu, devoid of any facets of modernity, is juxtaposed with a metropolitan setting, where “the buildings are to be tall, the structures are to be sound, the stairs are to be winding” (Kincaid 39). The structure of the sentences foregrounds change in process which is introduced by a foreign agent that sought to impose its own cultural codes and ways. Colonialism is not only alluded to through the “ancient ships” (Kincaid 38); it is also referred to through the symbolic mention of “the hyacinths [that] look as if they will bloom” (Kincaid 39). As a Mediterranean flower whose bulbs are poisonous, the hyacinth is considered alien to the Caribbean – being the geographical area of concern to Kincaid. It is, therefore, considered to be an allusion to the European intruder whose poisonous presence in the Caribbean as well as Africa is frowned upon.

The girl’s “rebellion against Eurocentric culture and the authority figures, who impose its standards on the vanquished,” (Snodgrass 64) is reflected in her subversion of the very foundation of the myth of genesis as portrayed in the Christian religious canon. In her Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New Worlds, Jana Evans Braziel expounds on the biblical creation story as chronicled in the Book of Genesis. The biblical account of the origins of creation foregrounds three axiomatic sacred separations, namely the primary segregation between light and darkness; the secondary distinction between heavens and waters; and the tertiary division of land from sea. Yet, in her text, Kincaid rejects these revered separations and rather proposes a conception of the world that centers a level of
correspondence between its various elements, a correspondence that contradicts with the contents of the Book of Genesis. “The valleys [then] correspond to the mountains, the mountains correspond to the sea, the sea corresponds to the dry land, [and] the dry land corresponds to the snake whose limbs are now reduced” (Kincaid 39).

Her disapproval of such separateness as the natural order of things in the universe echoes her rejection of “the divisions as acts of (divine and human and ideological and mythic and historical) power” (Braziel 21). It also implies subversion of power hierarchies through the assertion that the entire chain of beings corresponds not to God, but “to the snake whose limbs are now reduced” (Kincaid 39), which contradicts the Christian theological beliefs. In other words, it belongs to the Fallen Angel. The textually-strategic empowerment of Lucifer implies the consolidation of the soucouyant’s power as well, since she is traditionally associated with the ‘devil.’ Yet, this God/Devil dichotomy as a linguistic distinction that respectively references good and evil is established on the basis of the Christian religious diction. Indeed, in her “Vodoun, or the Voice of Gods,” Joan Dayan asserts that, in Caribbean spirituality, “the devotee refers to his loa [god or spirit] not only as anges, mysteries or saints, or les invisibles, but also as diables [devils]. […] The practitioner has internalized the language of Christian denomination taught to him by the priest or pastor in order to wean his belief […]” (26). Dayan foregrounds the way in which language interferes in self-expression and world representation. The Caribbean practitioners of West African spirituality employ terms like “angels” and “devils” to refer to their “loa” not out of genuine desire to communicate their perception of the world to an Other who holds a different tongue, but rather due to the linguistic dissemination imposed by colonialism—whether religious or institutional. The soucouyant is, therefore, present in the text as “a spirit in Obeah who metamorphoses, seduces, and traverses the boundaries of matter-spirit, animal-human, evil-good” (Braziel 54).

The empowerment of the ‘she-devil’ is further evidenced through the daughter’s act of rowing away from “a man [who] was in a shroud,” pretending “[she] didn’t know what [she] was doing” (Kincaid 39). The employment of the capitalized third-person pronoun “He” to refer to this man and the peculiar physical depiction that centralizes “the shroud” suggests the image to be an allusion to Christ. Upon beckoning to the girl in the boat to accompany him, she narrowed her eyes, in suspicion and decided to row away, thus further distancing herself from him. Consequently, her self-alienation then, far from being an arbitrary act, translates into a strategic occurrence. Indeed, the girl’s pretence of ignorance implies residual knowledge, for in her choice of rejecting a land where she saw Christ, she renounces a conception of the motherland as impregnated with the legacies of colonialism. With the mother’s letter from home being representative of the bond or connection with the motherland, the daughter’s previously-highlighted discontent with the epistle epitomizes her alienation from a land that feels less like home due to its inability to overcome a traumatic history of imperialism.

Conclusion:
Through her adoption of the stream of consciousness technique, manifest not only in the unconventionally transgressive use of punctuation and sentence structure, but also in the lack of paragraph indentation, logicality and temporality or chronology; Kincaid gives life to a narrative that is marked by fragmentariness and yet displays a conspicuous level of unity thanks to the constant referencing to symbols and imageries. Kincaid’s preference of postmodern narration echoes her rebellion as a postcolonial writer “against precise British
genre parameters” (Paravisini-Gebert 44). The stylistic deviation that is reflected at the level of form posits this piece of writing as a test of the boundaries of the short story, as it is an examination not only of the shape, but also of the limits of its power. The strategic lack of physical action in “The Letter from Home,” which is conventionally perceived to be a characteristic of the traditional novelistic writing, brings to the fore mental and psychic activity. Kincaid, thus, offers the reader “a sense of direct participation in a character’s mental processes” (Macauley 88). The resultant narrative incoherence, which is conditioned by fragmentariness and illogicality as indivisible aspects of prespeech level, is contained through continuous allusions to symbols that are derived from the Caribbean folk tradition of storytelling. Engaging in an act of artistic or “aesthetic projection” rather than simply re-inscribing the folkloric (Carvalho-Neto 35), the author adapts these symbols— with the primary symbol being that of the soucouyant— as modes of resistance and criticism. Kincaid ultimately proffers a critique of a multitude of hierarchical systems of power— whether parental, colonial or even literary.
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