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Who Loves Lucy? How Education Shapes Lucy's Relationships and Personality

From generation to generation, education is the single most important thread tying the human race together. At the heart of every personality is education in one form or another. Education is foundational; it determines what we think about and the actions we take every day, and the quality and source of this education is paramount in determining personality. Jamaica Kincaid, author of the first-person narrated novel *Lucy*, does not tread lightly in her portrayal of a girl-turned-woman. She paints the picture of Lucy as an incredibly independent human being with an intricate, yet ambivalent take on every aspect of her own life. Any attempt to isolate and explain the distant, analytic, and disconnected facets of Lucy's personality must include a look at all of her educational sources, from early stages living with her mother and attending a British colonial school to the variety of encounters and experiences she has in New York. Through these and other scenes, one inevitably sees how Lucy's foundation, established by the primary places and people in her life, ultimately trivializes her relationships and blunts her personality.

Beginning with Lucy's formal education in the West Indies requires a historical background on the educational structure at the time. Lucy was born in 1949 in Antigua and attended Queen Victoria Girl's school, at a time when the typical white plantation ideal of "education breeds discontent" had recently faded from the public position of power. In the West Indies during this time, the government (Britain in this case) paid teacher salaries, building costs, and provided for building maintenance and supplies. Education was compulsory for those between the ages of six and twelve and ran from early October to late June. A *New York Amsterdam News* article from the late

1950s explains that there was “much emphasis placed on memory,” and subjects ranged from arithmetic to United Kingdom history, an educational spectrum which does not appear to appeal to Lucy in even the slightest way. One of the more interesting excerpts from the article remarks that boys received “preferential treatment.” Although not much else is explained pertaining to this statement, this gender gap might provide some insight into Lucy’s thought processes and later relationships with males.

Perhaps the first time standardized education ostracized Lucy was when it forced her to learn William Wordsworth’s poem, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” and recite it in front of a large, public audience. This seems to be the moment that begins taking Lucy’s personality and shaping it into the precise, analytic woman she turns into. As Lucy recounts the story, she remarks on how “everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me” (Kincaid 18). Typically, enthusiastic response is greeted by an average school-age boy or girl with gratitude or even relief, but Lucy is stunned that such a menial task has led to this warm reception. She reveals a distorted sense of accomplishment to the reader with this kind of unexpected reaction to the audience’s expected action. In addition, she seems to draw no pride from this experience, and she confirms that at this point she “was then at the height of [her] two-facedness” (Kincaid 18). Lucy is extraordinarily intelligent. She recognizes this analysis and understands that she is not experiencing the average, intended reaction, so she puts up a false front of appreciation that turns out to be a recurring theme of the novel. In terms of cultivating any sort of relationships with other people, Lucy’s behavior in this situation treads far from any theme of social interaction, increasing her distance from others on both a mental and personal scale. In this sense, her reaction to the crowd is largely counterproductive as it relates to Lucy building any sort of meaningful connections with other people. In a critical essay on Kincaid, Gay Wachman establishes that “Whatever her narrators tell me about their feelings, however unpleasant or extreme they may be, I accept, as long as I’m reading,

as ‘true’ (Wachman 2); it is easy to see through the filter of Lucy’s public education experience why this sort of uncontested acceptance of Lucy’s claims are reasonable, and a good indicator of the current state of her personality.

Lucy’s relationship with education through the arts is not limited to this encounter. During the latter half of the story, she describes the time when Mariah first takes her to the museum to see “paintings by a man, a French man, who had gone halfway across the world to live” despite having a comfortable life with wife and children (Kincaid 95). Lucy claims that she understands “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), but she is awfully discontented with and disconnected from her current state of affairs to claim that she understands the concept of a haven. Lucy seems to have a moderately distorted, one-sided relationship with the arts through the recurring theme of escape from the home world into a “haven” of sorts. This obsession over the theme of getting away from home strongly shapes Lucy and provides her with this desire to distance herself that the reader notices page after page, opting instead to sit back and try to analyze everything by mental dissection. In fact, even Wordsworth’s poem itself is a sort of mirror into Lucy’s soul for most of the novel. She has a nightmare the evening after her recitation in which she is “being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils” until she eventually falls and is buried by them forever (Kincaid 18). This can be read as a reflection of her old life in Antigua and its haunting presence and influence over her, even when she is hundreds of miles away. Daffodils represent Lucy’s past and everything she dislikes about it, so she again does everything she can to distance herself from it. Considering the sum of the distances Lucy manages to establish between herself and nearly every other entity in the novel is really astonishing; certainly the force of others’ attraction toward Lucy is far outweighed by her own repelling force toward the outside world, which contributes to her underdeveloped personality.

Perhaps one of the few exceptions to this general rule is Lucy's mother, a woman with whom she has her most complicated relationship of the novel. Lucy consistently struggles between her desire to completely establish herself as a separate being from her mother and her deep, desperate longing for her. Her mother often writes letters to her during the course of the novel; Lucy expresses the desire "to burn them at the four corners and send them back to her unread," adding that "It was an act, I had read somewhere, of one lover rejecting another, but I could not trust myself to go too near them. I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her" (Kincaid 91). This should be striking to the reader that has grown accustomed to Lucy always holding her instinct and intuition above all else; in this scenario she explicitly expresses a feeling of self-distrust, which is surprising and a strong symbol of the power Lucy's mother holds on her mindset, and consequently her personality, at all times. The continued building of Lucy's emotional wall is reinforced by the removal from her mother, "source of all intelligence, power, beauty, and magic, [who] has been replaced by Lucy's wealthy employer, the affectionate but sheltered and naïve Mariah, who proffers books on feminism to help Lucy over her deep sense of loss and despair" (Simmons 2). The letter scene is probably the most transparent look the reader gets at Lucy's soul, perhaps aside from the emotional ending of the novel. At many times she lacks any respectable level of longing for anyone, including the numerous guys she merely hooks up with and even the family she lives with for the majority of the story. By contrast, while Lucy's relationship with the arts establishes her constant need to escape to a "haven," her relationship with her mother is always clawing at her, trying to keep her in the past and pulling her into a mental feedback loop. Finally, the last significant interaction that the reader gets between the two is the scene where Lucy's mom reveals she is named after Lucifer of Christianity's Holy Bible. It is hard to tell whether or not her mother does more harm than good during this revelation; Lucy claims that she transforms from feeling "burdened and old and tired to feeling light, new, clean" (Kincaid 152). But she regresses a

bit when she states that she never thought her own scenario could be distantly related to the “stories of the fallen” (Kincaid 152). Not only does the theme of distance continue in this passage, but in a roundabout way Lucy reveals that she believes she belongs among these ranks of the fallen. Through this revelation, she further proclaims herself an outcast and continues to build space between herself and the many non-maternal relations she has taken on to this point in the story.

It is precisely these secondary and tertiary relationships and settings that Lucy finds herself in that serve to reinforce her distinct ambivalence toward these individuals and the world as a whole. Toward the end of the novel, two of her “closest” (relatively speaking) friends finally begin to alienate Lucy in such a way that reveals the colossal size of the stone wall that she has built between her exterior emotions and interior feelings. As she begins to suspect that her roommate Peggy and boyfriend Paul may have similar desires for each other, she remarks that “I only hoped they would not get angry and disrupt my life when they realized I did not care” (Kincaid 163). The reader can confirm more about Lucy from this single statement than everything revealed in the novel to this point. She is far from angry at the two; rather, she is so disconnected from the reality of her situation that she hopes they will not be angry with her, who has done nothing to cause such anger. She expresses the desire to have the course of her life uninterrupted by the two. There is almost inconceivable irony in the fact that she expects a man who she willingly sleeps with and a woman who she lives with every day not to alter her life in any way. And finally, she claims that she does not care, though this might be Lucy’s first notion that can be taken with a grain of salt given the uncharacteristic, climactic release of emotion that concludes the story, and the only moment that contrasts with a typical reading of a Kincaid narrator. It appears to be Lucy’s last ditch effort to remain “strong” and keep up a satisfying distance between herself and people threatening to exhibit any sort of control over her emotions, an effort that ultimately fails in the end. Unfortunately for Lucy, this is the only way she knows how to handle the situation. Through her early education,

exposure to the arts, and her mother, the only thing she has really become comfortable with is suitable distance, but the ending of the novel seems to be the mental strain of maintaining this emotional wall finally outweighing Lucy's emotional capacity.

Lucy, just as most humans are, is a reflection of her education, no matter where or when the source. She consistently compares her new world to her old one, the world that provided her with her most important human connection, and "while this may not be the world Lucy lives in now, it is still the world that lives in her" (Simmons 7). Despite this internal, permanent connection to a time, a place, and a person close to her, her cold, crumbling relationships in her new environment end up defining her more strongly than her mother ever could have. As a result, Lucy's character is ultimately defined by an enormous emotional road block and a plethora of empty relationships that taught her what she already knew all along.

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