The Power of Syntax: Parataxis in Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

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A writer’s syntax is crucial not only to identify oneself as different from other writers but also to make language work for the story one is telling. Jamaica Kincaid is a well-known fiction writer partly due to the unique forms of syntax in her work. Critics and readers scrutinize her syntax closely, questioning its relevance and effectiveness, and end up hating or loving her work. Whether one enjoys Kincaid’s syntax or not, it cannot be denied that Kincaid shapes her syntax to fit each story; she writes in a way that other writers do not. Her syntax works to create a meaning between the language, the story and the world beyond. The particular type of syntax Kincaid uses is parataxis, literally placing side by side or using a series of independent clauses. This effect puts all clauses on the same level of importance versus subordinating some to others. Parataxis is used in one of Kincaid’s most famous short stories, “Girl,” a one-paragraph story that consists of a list of advice from a mother to her daughter. All of the clauses, including both the mother’s advice and the daughter’s few responses, are strung together with semi-colons. Jamaica Kincaid’s use of parataxis in her short story “Girl” reflects characterization, forces readers to decipher connections within and beyond the story, and represents an unsuppressed, more real reality through language.

The parataxis in “Girl” allows Kincaid to weave the mindset and emotions of the characters into the syntax, making it easier for the reader to connect with the characters. For instance, the pace of the opening lines represents how the daughter’s mindset is one of innocence and naiveté as she silently takes in her mother’s advice without questioning it. She trusts her mother, and so lets her advice steadily flow into her mind. Diane Simmons, professor and author of Kincaid’s biography, writes, “In ‘Girl’ the mother’s chant of information and advice enfolds and ensnares the daughter, rendering the girl nearly helpless before the mother’s transforming will” (1). Through the paratactic connections in the opening lines, one can see how the daughter
is pulled into the smooth rhythm of her mother’s constant stream of advice: “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clotheslines to dry” (Kincaid 1). The parallel structure of these lines combined with the connections by the conjunction ‘and’ and a semicolon illustrates through syntax how the mother’s advice came by a mind-numbing beat. The parataxis “charm[s] and lull[s]” the reader in the same way the advice spellbinds the girl, which lets the reader slip into the mindset of the daughter (Simmons 1). The reader taps into the girl’s emotions through the syntax as well. Like the girl, the reader feels trust towards the mother at first due to the repetitive and flowing nature of the advice. Both the reader and the girl feel the connectedness between all the pieces of advice as one tumbles into the next, and they all begin to run together as the reader feels the rhythm in the following lines: “cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash” (Kincaid 1). The reader and the girl are still in a trance, trusting the mother, so when the mother begins to accuse and question her daughter’s behavior and innocence in one of the next lines, the reader feels just as betrayed as the girl.

Suddenly, Kincaid drops in a question, “is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?” and the reader feels the young girl’s sense of betrayal (Simmons 1). The girl is caught off guard because her mother has never questioned her obedience before, and the reader is surprised because, while all the clauses are connected and independent, this is the first one that breaks Kincaid’s rhythm of the previous clauses and syntax to follow the tone of a question. Betrayed by Kincaid, the reader begins to question the paratactic connections of the story as the girl, betrayed by her mother, begins to question her trust towards her mother. The reader’s and the
girl’s confusion and hurt grow as the piece progresses. As the mother begins to accuse her daughter of being a slut and starts to shape her advice so as to curve her daughter away from appearing as “the slut I have warned you against becoming,” the daughter’s betrayed emotions swell (Kincaid 1). The reader empathizes with the daughter now more than ever because though these accusations are wildly different in nature from the advice over cooking and shopping at the start of the story, Kincaid has still linked them all together and placed them side by side with semicolons. The reader starts to wonder why Kincaid has forced a connection between all of the mother’s lines of advice when they cover a wide range of topics, and this questioning aligns the reader’s questioning of Kincaid with the daughter’s questioning of her mother. In the end, both the reader and the girl have been deceived by the stable cadence of the opening of the story and have been led to question what the connection is between the mother that gives advice on cooking and the mother who warns her daughter not to be “the slut I know you are so bent on becoming” (Kincaid 1). Kincaid’s parataxis, her connected syntax, has not just connected the clauses but has connected the reader to the girl by having the syntax mirror the emotional and psychological process the girl endures in this story.

Kincaid’s syntax succeeds to represent the characterization of the mother to the reader as well. Retired English professor, Dr. Wolfgang G. Müller states, “It is the syntax which contributes essentially to the linguistic representation of a specific thought process of a specific literary character” (402). In short, the syntax is how a character’s way of thinking is portrayed to the reader, and though Kincaid masters this with the daughter despite her two attributed lines of the piece, she accomplishes this just as well with the mother, whose words devour the majority of the story. The mother’s thought process is that she must brainwash her daughter to follow the rules of patriarchy in the same way she was brainwashed as a girl. She must lure her daughter
into following her advice, so that the submissive and domestic behavior of women can be passed on and the cycle of patriarchy can continue. To do this, the mother habitually passes on her knowledge of female duties, like cooking, doing laundry, and shopping as it comes up, producing a constant run of advice to her daughter. The parataxis of the opening lines reflects for the reader the mother’s habit of passing on her knowledge of the woman’s role in the societal structure whenever she can; immediately, the reader catches on to what the mother is trying to do. Dr. Müller argues, too, that asyndetic syntax, syntax where clauses are connected without conjunctions, is “a mirror of emotional states,” and as the piece progresses, the mother uses fewer conjunctions (400). The parataxis does not only achieve the mother’s mindset but also her emotions, and the syntax makes her feelings of both numbness and hostility towards patriarchy apparent to the reader.

The cadenced pace of the opening of the piece impresses the mother’s numbness on the reader. The mother spouts off advice in a rhythm that is almost too steady, creeping on the side of monotonic. The mother seems absent of emotion as she instinctively explains to her daughter which days to do the laundry and how to cook certain foods. It has all become the dull pattern of her life; she knows nothing outside of her patriarchal place. Parataxis here makes it possible for the mother’s numbness to seep into the reader as it has seeped into her. It also creates a perception for the reader of the mother’s desire to rebel against her place in society, since parataxis is “a process of perception and growing awareness,” and towards the end of the piece, the mother grows more hostile in her tone and begins to give advice that does not follow patriarchy (Müller 401). While the mother’s advice is all strung together, the mother attempts to threaten the integrity of the paratactic rhythm by inserting advice on “how to bully a man” and “how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and…how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on
you”–both very un-lady like actions according to the codes of patriarchy. Because Kincaid connects these un-patriarchal guidelines to the traditional patriarchal ones the reader is able to feel the mother’s emotions of being trapped within the woman’s place in society where she must shape her daughter into filling the same role she herself despises. The mother can give her daughter unconventional advice all she wants, but she is still confined within patriarchy’s place for her, as the reader is still confined in Kincaid’s paratactic structure. Writer and professor Nicole Matos describes Kincaid’s parataxis as “syntactic disorientation,” she also alludes to the fact that Kincaid’s syntax accomplishes two things: it embodies the characters of her stories, and it makes the reader hyperaware of the act of reading causing them to “self-reflect” on the purpose of the syntax (88). Readers form deeper connections to the characters as the unique syntax merges the character’s mindset and emotions onto the reader, leaving the reader to question further the connections between all the feelings and events the characters go through. Without parataxis, “Girl” would not intertwine the reader and the characters together and force the reader to think about all the connections in the piece as much, and while the syntax pushes the reader to think deeper about character, it pushes them in other ways, too.

As the parataxis calls the readers to study the characterization of the mother and the daughter, it challenges the reader to look past the connectedness of the story to question the connections between the story and the outside world. While Matos discusses the parataxis in Kincaid’s novel, *Mr. Potter*, her analysis of Kincaid’s syntax can apply to “Girl” as well. Matos explains how Kincaid’s leveling of all the events in a story make these events appear “rob[bed]…of their importance” and doused in “causality,” but she claims that this does not equal “a disavowal of all meaning” (85). Rather, it leads the reader to question why all of these event are connected. Why *does* Kincaid choose to wrap the mother’s cooking and cleaning
advice, her retaliation against patriarchy, her assumptions of her daughter’s future slutdom and her daughter’s quiet responses all up in one long sentence? By stringing patriarchy, the mother’s numbness and hostility, and the girl’s innocence and betrayal together, Kincaid is insisting that these things are all connected. Somehow, “iron[ing] your father’s khaki pants” is connected to not “walk[ing] barehead[ed] in the hot sun” and to “mak[ing] a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child” (Kincaid 1). And since these are all independent clauses, Kincaid is making the claim that they are all of equal importance. The reader is left to decipher on their own what the connections are and if it really all is of equal importance. In fact, Kincaid’s absence of deliberating the levels of importance of the content leads readers to “assert what Kincaid slyly proffers as ‘not’…important, or present” and to decide for themselves what they wish to advocate is the deeper meaning of the story (Matos 85). If Kincaid wrote in hypotaxis, she would be doing much of this work for the readers by breaking the story down into parts and labeling which parts are more important than others.

While questioning the connection between the story, the syntax, and the world beyond, one can debate over what it means for “Girl” to be paratactic instead of hypotactic. Though I’ve depicted how the syntax represents the mother’s failed attempt to break away from patriarchy, the parataxis can also be seen as a reaction against patriarchy by way of its reaction against hypotaxis. Hypotaxis is “subsumed and obscured by those in power,” as in it is the preferred syntax of patriarchy (Matos 86). Hypotaxis subordinates some clauses to the importance of others and puts each clause in its specific place as opposed to parataxis, which allows all the clauses to be of equal importance and to be placed side by side. Hypotactic clauses are comparable to women, who in patriarchal societies are also subordinated to the importance of men and who are put in a specific place. By deciding against writing in hypotaxis, Kincaid is
refraining from upholding the language of patriarchy. This choice contributes to the mother’s desire to escape patriarchy, and though she is still stuck in the end spewing out her long trail of guidelines to being a proper woman within patriarchy, Kincaid has found a way through syntax to escape it.

However, Kincaid’s syntax is still more complex than this because it can be seen as embodying the way mothers in patriarchal societies trained their daughters to take their natural place in society as subordinates of men. Simmons describes it like this: Kincaid’s stories are that of betrayal. The mother at first nurtures the daughter with “simple, benevolent, and appropriately maternal advice,” which, as I mentioned earlier, in turn, draws the daughter into a confidence with the mother; then, the mother turns on her and critiques her of becoming a slut. The audience “come[s] to see that the mother's speech, inviting with nurturing advice on the one hand and repelling with condemnationary characterization on the other, not only manipulates the girl into receptivity to the mother's condemning view, but also teaches the art of manipulation” (Simmons 1). The parataxis not only manipulates the daughter into following the mother’s advice on being a proper submissive woman, but it teaches the girl how she will one day manipulate her own daughter(s) into following these guidelines. It is the parataxis, the hypnotizing sway from one clause to the next, which captures the daughter’s attention and shows her the ways of tricking women into submission. Not only is the mother passing on how to be a submissive woman but how to train other girls to fill these roles. Had the advice come in the form of hypotaxis, the daughter would not have been as easily persuaded into becoming the person society wanted her to be, and she would not have learned the most effective way to in the future train her own daughter to fall into the same position. Examining the text this way, Kincaid’s syntax in “‘Girl’ may be read as a kind of primer in the manipulative art of rhythm and repetition” or parataxis
(Simmons 1). By investigating further what meanings Kincaid could have intended for the story in her use of parataxis, one can see it as both a reaction against patriarchy and hypotaxis as well as a “how-to” guide for girls in the art of manipulation.

One of the most significant accomplishments of Kincaid’s parataxis is its ability to better represent reality in her work than hypotaxis would. Many writers, readers, and critics agree that the purpose of fiction is to attempt to represent reality, and one of the ways writers try to do that is through the language they use; however, most writers seek to do this with hypotaxis – not Jamaica Kincaid. Though some philosophers and linguists argue that there is no “resemblance” between language and reality, in Dr. Müller’s defense of parataxis and other iconic syntaxes, he argues that “iconic forms of expression are so frequent, almost omnipresent, in aesthetic or poetic language that their denial would be tantamount to a denial of the nature of the verbal artifact” (393). Basically, he means that because writers so often try to shape language to help them represent reality, it is impossible to claim that language doesn’t represent reality, but there is something special about parataxis, especially the parataxis of Kincaid’s writing, that goes beyond other forms of language in signifying reality. Müller writes, too, that parataxis is “the expression of emotion” and that the form of parataxis sets the mood for the language (397). Not only does Kincaid better represent emotion by using parataxis, thereby representing a large part of reality as we humans perceive it, but her particular flavor of parataxis, the way she shapes it differently to fit the story she is telling, better represents reality through language than other writers do. For example, in *Mr. Potter*, she uses a lot of ‘and’s and commas to create parataxis, while in “Girl” she relies less on conjunctions and more on semicolons, but in both stories she uses a form of parataxis. She changes the parataxis to match the characters and the piece of
reality she is portraying in that specific story. The parataxis of *Mr. Potter* would fail to represent the reality of “Girl” because they are different realities.

In an interview in *The American Reader*, Kincaid is asked about her comments in a previous interview about her idea “that traditional writing, is actually what is artificial because thinking doesn’t work that way,” and she responds by explaining that if she were to write traditionally (or use hypotaxis) “a kind of truth…would be lost” and that “There are all sorts of things that the conventional way of [writing] suffocates. I am interested in a kind of life that the convention would suffocate” (Kincaid). Kincaid believes that hypotaxis does not represent reality because people do not think in the form of hypotaxis, and so, to write using hypotaxis would be to write a false reality; it would be to tell a lie or to not tell the truth of the world (which is one of the main purposes of writing). There are also, as she explicates, things in life, in reality, that hypotaxis cannot convey. She is interested in writing about real realities, not false ones. Though Kincaid’s syntax may make the everyday things in life seem casual, she exposes “an unacknowledged aspect” of these small realities by connecting them with parataxis to bigger realities, such as how advice on cooking turns into ideals of patriarchy (Matos 86). Müller writes that “the interdependence of form and meaning is an essential characteristic of the aesthetic use of language;” one cannot separate form, or syntax, from meaning as one cannot separate language from reality. The form and meaning work together to represent reality through language–like parataxis, it is all connected, all equally important. It appears Kincaid is a writer who understands this connectedness and believes that the only way to truly represent these things is to actually connect them all through parataxis.

Kincaid’s syntax has been the subject of much debate among critics, who meticulously examine her unique language to question its necessity and effectiveness for each story she tells.
After studying and inspecting her short story “Girl,” I found her parataxis to be justified. At first glance, the reader may wonder what is accomplished through the one sentence structure of the story, but following a close reading, one can see that Kincaid’s use of parataxis in “Girl” accomplishes quite a bit. Not only does she manage to bring both characters alive through the syntax, but she also permits the reader to experience with ease the mentality and emotions of the daughter and the mother. However, while it is easy for a reader to relate to the characters, it is not so simple to decide what Kincaid thought was most important in the story, since parataxis places all content on equal ground. Kincaid leaves it to the reader to figure out what they feel is the meaning to the connections throughout the story, and it is possible, as I explained above, for the reader to find the story to be both a reaction against patriarchy and as an embodiment of it. These contradictions prove that Kincaid wants her readers to work hard not to put all the pieces together but to figure out why all the pieces are already together. Though Kincaid’s syntax makes her stand out from other writers, who like her are all trying to represent reality, she believes that her writing style better represents reality than traditional syntax, hypotaxis. To her, hypotaxis suppresses some realities, but the purpose of writing is to represent the realities that others suppress. Jamaica Kincaid uses parataxis in “Girl” to challenge readers to relate to her characters – think the way they think, feel the way they feel – to search for meaning through the connections within the story and in the world beyond, and above all else, to discover the reality that conventional writing “suffocates” (Kincaid).
Works Cited


