From A Mother

What does the word “slut” really mean in the story “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid? Some may portray the word “Slut” as an extremely sexually active female, but the word actually has two meanings. According to Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, “Slut” means, “1. A lewd women (AKA, prostitute), and 2. Slovenly women (AKA, lack of cleanliness)” (“Slut”). When comparing the two previously given definitions to the use of the word by the mother, it is seen that she is using the second meaning. In the story “Girl,” the mother is constantly drilling and educating her daughter on various topics, meanwhile warning her from becoming a slut. The story takes place in the mid 1900’s, where food is home grown, clothes are made and maintained by hand, house work is the females responsibly and a person’s good social status matter. The story is about the relationship between a mother and a daughter. The mother is her daughter’s mentor in knowing the role a female should take in society. One may feel the mother was very hurtful and mean toward her daughter, but she was actually trying to protect her daughter from being frowned upon by society, by men and by life.

First, society frowns upon those who make their own path, females in general. Even at a young age, kids and adults will judge presentation, action, and appearance. In the story “Girl,” the mother is looking out for her daughter’s well-being. The mother wants her daughter to be respected and cherished, not to be viewed as a slut. For example, the mother tells her daughter, “buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse” (Kincaid 139-140), which shows the mother
wants her daughter to grow up and present herself with purity and elegance. Just like any young lady, if one presents oneself with confidence and respect, then others will show the same respect in return. Not only does her mother expect her daughter to dress like a lady, she also expects her daughter to have great manners and social conduct. One way the mother educates her daughter is by the way she smiles. For example, “this is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely” (140). By not smiling, the girl may show weakness or shame, but the mother is teaching her daughter, even at a young age, to always hold her head up high and never show weakness. A smile can imply a lot about someone’s character. It can show a person to be strong, confident, sociable, and generous. Society can bring a person down, but, if a person shows no weakness, then society should view them as a strong and respected individual.

Second, the mother not only requires her daughter to be self-confident and socially adept, but also to know how to treat and be treated by men. For instance, her mother informs her daughter by telling her, “This is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you” (140). This shows that a woman should respect a man, but, in return, a man must respect a woman. Women are known for caring for their homes, and men are known for running the family, but no man deserves to treat a woman like he owns her. Both men and women should be treated equal, no matter the status in one’s family. Not only does the mother want her daughter to be treated right, she also wants her daughter to know how to act and to have good hygiene. The mother tells her daughter, “this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit” (140). Acting provocative and having bad hygiene incurs society’s negative judgment. In this case, the mother uses the label “Slut” to
illustrate her point. Every mother should teach her daughter, even at an early age, how to present herself around a man to be acknowledged as a well-respected woman.

Third, and most importantly, the mother wants her daughter to grow up to be self-sufficient. In the mid-1900s, life for a female was not an easy task. Women were presumed to be the homemakers and complete the cooking, cleaning, ironing, washing, and sewing. The mother plays the dominant role in educating her daughter in these tasks. For example, the mother tells her daughter “how to sew on a button,” “how to make a bread pudding [and] doukona,” “how you sweep a whole house,” “how to grow okra [and] dasheen” … and “how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bend on becoming”(140). One may assume that if the daughter can take care of herself and her home, then she should not be living in shame and filthiness. A mother’s job is to steer her daughters toward the right path in life, and only hope and pray her daughters don’t veer too far off that path. For instance, the mother told her daughter to “always squeeze bread to make sure it is fresh” (140), which symbolizes the necessity of being a clean and respectable woman. Life’s challenges and hardships are learned and taught by mothers to their daughters through every generation.

In conclusion, one may feel the mother lived the life lessons she is teaching her daughter because she is a very strong and a hard working woman, who only wants best for her daughter. Although many readers may view the mother as uncaring or controlling, in actually she tries to guide her daughter in the right direction so her duagher will not be frowned upon by society, by men and by life. Every aspect of a female’s life is scrutinized, from their appearance, attitude, and social status. According to Becnel, “the girl must learn to perform a very delicate balancing act if she wishes to please those who are in positions of authority above her--in her case, this
includes just about everyone--while still carving out some kind of life for herself’ (Becnel 2013). Life is full of ups and downs, and every woman should strive to be known as a graceful woman and not a slut who can’t “feel the bread” (140).
Work Cited

