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Eng 110

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Critical Response

In the short autobiographical narrative, *On Seeing England for the First Time* by Jamaica Kincaid, vivid imagery and detailed repetition is used to describe the way the author feels about growing up under the oppressive British colonial rule. Kincaid grows up in Antigua with a dark shadow of England continually looming over her daily existence. She cannot escape constant reminders in school or at home of the subjugation she endures. The powerlessness she feels in being told to do certain things in a certain way aids her development in painting a justifiably negative portrait of England. All her behaviors have been stripped of adequate choice, leaving little room for individuality. She cannot simply appreciate her own unique island culture because most of it has been stripped away and replaced by imperialistic rule.

The issue of being dominated by a European power has been a long lasting occurrence, yet Kincaid draws attention to her parent’s apparent blindness of how they are collectively being treated. While she might not be happy she has to eat large breakfasts because British people do, her father has also been influenced into wearing a felt hat, virtually from when he gets out of bed to when he gets back in it, which is not exactly the right work hat as it does not provided real protection from the strong island sun. This is symbolic of how England affects them from the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep. The three words, “Made in England” haunt her everywhere she goes, its inscribed on her shoes, socks, the undergarments she wears, on the side of the cocoa can she eats everyday, and on her box of oats amongst other places. Everything that exists around her is either made in England or has some conceptual English notion attached. As she states, the only thing that is not made in England is: “the sea, the sky, and the air”. The depressing nature of this stark reality continues in school where she is forced to memorize banal historical facts like the dates Kings existed. On all tests she must be able to draw the map of England, a place that she has never been, yet defines who she is. When the teacher states: “This is England”, the serious and authoritative manner in which she presents these words is drawn into comparison to Jerusalem, the holy land. It is ingrained in the classroom that England is valued as the students’ “source of something” or “sense of something”. These two phrases are repeated twice each to show what was supposed to be meaningful, what was important and what was not according to the school system.

Powerful and detailed imagery is alluded to when Kincaid eats food with her bare hands instead of with a knife and fork in the proper English way her mother teaches her. She has to hide the fact she preferring eating this way from her proud mother, just like she has to hide the fact she hates England and everything it stands for. Knowing the map of England stimulates a feeling of burden and pain that she refuses, which is why she is glad she doesn't know how to draw it. The words “erasure” are repeated in this section which signify how the process of being conquered erases someone’s real existence. The word is symbolic of her own identity being erased, perhaps not physically but internally. Throughout these passages, Kincaid supplies us with numerous anecdotal evidence that demonstrates the rigidness of everyday life under the system of integral English rule. England control both physical and non-physical elements of Antiguans’ life such as: clothing and food supplies, but also mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. The school Kincaid goes to stresses the teachings of English history, yet she cannot feel more detached from England and its oppressive rule. She also mentions how her grandfather, uncle and brother are all named Alfred after Alfred the Great, a King who died ten centuries ago. She mocks the idealization of him by saying, “I loved King Alfred”, after recalling a story about how he burned himself when making cakes.

The aversions towards England continue when she travels for the first time to England, now as an adult with a family. The majestic myths of England presented to her in school as a kid remain etched in her mind. The stuff she was supposed to forget, the “enforced amnesia”, like her familial routes tying back to the slave trade in Africa, proved difficult to forget. She still remembers how streets in her neighborhood are named after people like John Hawkins who established the first route to Africa and brought back slaves. The vivid memories she has of certain towns like Bath, come back to here when she is actually there, despite not physically stepping foot in England prior. The song about the white cliffs of Dover is ironic because the cliffs are in fact dirty. When they sang the line it alluded to the fact they had already been there and want to go back, but she did not want to. She cannot use the information taught about England to appreciate it as some magical or beautiful place. She resents the place and the people too. She even resents the “useless statues’ that she wishes she could send to a place where the sun is always present so they could develop a tan and look more like her and her family. Kincaid travels with a friend who ends up being rude and offensive because she cannot accept Kincaid’s views on England, despite herself not truly liking England either. For some reason it is problematic for the person colonized and oppressed not to like the country that oppressed them. The English people are rude to each other too, her friend feeling disrespected by a train conductor, yet this only supports Kincaid’s perspective.

After exchanging remarks about hedges of the English countryside and how privileged the people who live there are to not be satisfied with the landscape they have at their fingertips, Kingcaid has finally had enough. She wished that everything that had to do with England in the sentence would just die. She wonders who the people were that made her think she was incomplete or lacking in some aspect for not being English. If she would have made hateful remarks about England to her friend then she would have been told she has prejudices, yet the her prejudices hold no weight or force behind them, they are just unpopular opinions she possesses. Ultimately, Kincaid rebels the institutionalized colonialism in questioning the established order, the decisions and mentality of people around her, whether family or friends. The writer’s conscious use of repetition and evocative imagery helps her effectively communicate her message: the pain and challenge of growing up under British imperialism.