

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Born on the Caribbean island of Antigua, Jamaica Kincaid now lives in Vermont. She writes fiction about growing up in the West Indies and about the experience of West Indians who come to the United States. The following passage is adapted from an essay she published in 1993.

ALIEN SOIL

Whatever it is in the character of the English people that leads them to obsessively order and shape their landscape to such a degree that it looks like a painting (tamed, framed, captured, kind, decent, good, pretty), this quality of character is now blissfully lacking in the Antiguan people. I make this comparison only because so much of the character of the Antiguan people is influenced by and inherited, through conquest, from the English people. Among the traits the Antiguans inherited is a love of gossip. (This trait, I think, is responsible for the fact that England has produced such great novelists, but it has not yet worked to the literary advantage of the Antiguan people.)

When the English were a presence in Antigua--they first came to the island as slaveowners, when a man named Thomas Warner established a settlement there in 1632--the places where they lived were surrounded by severely trimmed hedges of plumbago, by sculptured shrubs of frangipani and hibiscus; their grass was green (odd, because water was scarce; the proper word for the climate is not "sunny" but "drought-ridden") and freshly cut; they kept trellises covered with roses, and beds of marigolds and chrysanthemums.

When the English left, most of their landscaping influence went with them. Before that, ordinary Antiguans (and by "ordinary Antiguans" I mean the Antiguan people, who are descended from the African slaves brought to this island by Europeans; this turns out to be a not uncommon way to become ordinary), the ones who had some money and could live in houses of more than one room, had gardens in which only flowers were grown. This made it even more apparent that they had some money, in that all their outside space was devoted not to feeding their families but to the sheer beauty of things. I can remember in particular one such family, who lived in a house with many rooms (four, to be exact). They had an indoor kitchen and a place for bathing (no indoor toilet, though); they had a lawn, always neatly cut, and they had beds of flowers, but I can now remember only roses and marigolds. I can remember those because once I was sent there to get a bouquet of roses for my godmother on her birthday.

The family also had, in the middle of their small lawn, a willow tree, pruned so that it had the shape of a pine tree--a conical shape--and at Christmastime this tree was decorated with colored lights (which was so unusual and seemed so luxurious to me that when I passed by this house I would beg to be allowed to stop and stare at it for a while). At Christmas, all willow trees would suddenly be called Christmas trees, and for a time, when my family must have had a small amount of money, I, too, had a Christmas tree—a lonely, spindly branch of willow sitting in a bucket of water in our very small house. No one in my family and, I am almost certain, no one in the family of the people with the lighted-up willow tree had any idea of the origins of the Christmas tree and the traditions associated with it. When these people (the Antiguans) lived under the influence of these other people (the English), there was naturally an attempt among some of them to imitate their rulers in this particular way--by rearranging the landscape--and

they did it without question. They can't be faulted for not asking what it was they were doing; that is the way these things work.

ESSAY TOPIC: What general ideas about influence does Kincaid present through her discussion of how "ordinary Antiguans" responded to the example of the English? To what extent do her ideas confirm or conflict with your own observations of how individuals or groups respond to the influence of others? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading.