

English B

Extended Essay

Category 3

Title: Female Friendship's Effect on Mental Health in Oppressive Systems

Research Question: *What role does female friendship and solidarity play in Susanna Kaysen's "Girl, Interrupted", and how does it contribute to or hinder the characters' struggles with mental health and personal freedom?*

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Introduction:

Literary memoirs generally reflect a unique reality where personal experience intertwine with wider social expectations, and this cause reader to observe how identity is affected by cultural and institutional pressure. *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) written by Susanna Kaysen's reveals a detailed reality of her stay in a psychiatric hospital during the late 1960s, however the text is not just has a simple autobiographical narrative. Kaysen uncovers the structure of institutionalization rather than just writing about her personal memories, she also unearths the restrictive gender norms embedded in the structure of the period and how these affect the medical treatment of women.

The 1960s caused an important change between the treatment and perception in the women's mental health field. After the 1950's and many wars the field of psychology was under the influence of rigid assumptions such as women who denied the gender roles were seen as "crazy". Through this perspective the bonds created in the *Girl, Interrupted* gain a deeper significance since female friendship's role is not just a comfort mechanism, it is also a form of resistance against a compressive system which tries to control all humanitarian side of patients. The solidarity and dependence between patients shows the importance of shared trauma that creates a bond of understanding.

This essay explores the research question: "What role does female friendship and solidarity play in Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, and how does it contribute to or hinder the characters' struggles with mental health and personal freedom?" Through a feminist literary perspective, the analysis will focus on how norms about gender affect the relationships created in a compressive psychiatric setting and the structure of institutional practices. Through close

textual analysis, the essay will identify the friendships' role as a not just an emotional support mechanism but also as a complex mechanism that acts as an emotional resistance.

Most importantly, Kaysen doesn't just take the one side of the friendship into account as an idealized perspective. Instead of this she shows that how can a friendship can be both destabilizing and nurturing. She holds a significant role in this case because she shows the effect of bonds created while creating a safe place in an oppressive system. She also takes account other sides of the friendships such as how they blur identity or cause a chaos for patients.

Therefore, this essay reveals that female solidarity in *girl, Interrupted* acts as a building block and a limitation, reflecting the intricate relationship among connection, identity and control within institutional spaces.

Mental Health Institution in 1960's:

In *Girl, Interrupted*, Kaysen introduces McLean Hospital not just a treatment centre but as reflection of a controlled institutional environment of United States during the 1960s. Rather than putting the recovery first, the structure of the system prioritizes regulation and categorization of patients. Separating the individuals by their mental health under the strict supervision create an atmosphere where control defeats the care, and the McLean Hospital also shows the crucial reality of clinical routines of its era and the difficulties experienced by the patients. These strict rules highlight the underlying main idea that the 1960s mental institution was controlling rather than healing.

This part is important for the memoir since it reflects where young women lived in rigorous conditions and the environment of the institution. Kaysen's ironic reflections and observational tone reveals the hard life of women in an environment that is restrictive. "The world of the hospital was a parallel universe with its own laws, its own customs, its own currency: pills, secrets, jokes" (Kaysen, p. 75), the opposition between the social and clinical life reveals the systematic feature of the hospital. The listing technique and word choice of used here like "pills, secrets, jokes" highlights the hospital's technique to replace individuality with routine. Also by using metaphors and literary devices Kaysen portrays hospital as a distorted place with its own rules, and she appears as both patient and observer. Also the word choice used here helps Kaysen to compress all the emotional reality of the mental health world into three simple nouns. "Jokes" here represents the coping mechanism of the girls, while "secretes" reveals the intimacy between patients because in a place where doctors try to control everything through "pills", secretes become something they can't control.

The daily routines in the memoir reinforce the nature of treatment within McLean and all of the mental hospital in the 1960s. Kaysen's observations about medication rituals "paper cup, pills, swallow, compliance" (Kaysen, p. 81) mirroring the monotonous rhythm of institutional life through short and repeated word choice. Kaysen's choice here claims how communication is replaced by compression. The absence of explanation from medical staff highlights a broader message which is patients are managed and controlled not healed. All in all, individuals are characterized and labelled by their diagnoses and not seen as a human.

The same institutional setting that tries to isolate patients also creates conditions for connection between patients and Kaysen uses this ironic event to show how paradoxical is the situation is. Kaysen's reflection that "we knew each other's madnesses, and in that knowledge, we found a kind of sanity" (Kaysen, p. 112) reinforces the importance of collective identity within confinement. The repetition of "we" challenges the isolating system that adopts categorization and highlights how significant is the mutual recognition. Kaysen shows the contradictory structure of the hospital since it tries to suppress individuality, it actually enables the formation of solidarity.

All in all, setting of the psychiatric institution in 1960s is important for the Kaysen's journey since it provides a place for the development of female friendship in the memoir. The institution here portrayed as a place that forces people to conform the society's norms and abandon their own individuality. This loss individuality makes a trauma-bond and interdependence among patients, since it changes their relationship into a coping mechanism. On the other hand, Kaysen does not see these bonds fully positive, she also takes account their negative sides too since they can also destroy the personal boundaries. Kaysen reveals the dependence and bonds between patients as a not simple comfort, she portrays them as a response to shared pain by reflecting the hospital as a place that tries to destroy identity.

Gendered Perspectives on Psychiatric Therapy and Treatment:

During the 1960s the treatment choices in the psychiatric institutions was shaped by both medical theories and gender assumptions. Kaysen reflects in *Girl, Interrupted* that psychiatric diagnosis came from cultural biases more than a medical thought. Even her diagnosis, decided in twenty-minute session, shows how easily women were labelled as “mentally ill” for not meeting the expectations of an “ideal women”. One of the important quotes from book is: “*My diagnosis had been handed down without much discussion, as though it were obvious to everyone but me*” (Kaysen, p. 38). The phrase “had been handed down” evokes a judicial moment not a medical decision, revealing a system where a male authority was accepted in an unquestioned way -since all doctors were male and there was just some nurses who were female- where women were portrayed like an unstable human being. Kaysen’s experience critiques a model of psychiatry that punishes deviation from traditional gender roles while offering readers to consider how female friendship in the hospital formed and how these friendships challenges the system.

Psychiatry in the 1960s didn’t serve its purpose, it was a place for controlling patients not healing them and they often punished women for not conforming the society’s expectations. A study from Mount Holyoke confirms both Kaysen’s experiences in the memoir and this pattern, revealing that “psychiatric categories disproportionately targeted women, anthologizing qualities such as anger, ambition, or sexual autonomy that diverged from feminine ideals” (Mount Holyoke, 2006, p.21). This shows that disorders such as hysteria were disproportionally diagnosed in women to pathologies traits like nonconformity and sexual independence. Kaysen questions her diagnosis constantly due to the oppressive system, asking whether she was truly ill or simply “a girl who made a mistake” (Kaysen, 1993, p. 42). This self-doubt is the biggest

indicator that the professional decisions in the psychiatry and cultural discipline were intertwined.

Kaysen's language and tone in the memoir reflects how psychiatric system deprives female patients of autonomy and privileges control over communication. She describes her treatment sessions as "*short, perfunctory, and concluded with a decision about my life I could not question*" (Kaysen, p. 37). This quote highlights Kaysen's passive voice in her own life and power imbalance caused by gender roles since a male doctor had a more say in her own life. Also the impersonal tone shows the relationship between male authority figures and female patients that is based on power and obedience. From a feminist literary approach, this reveals that psychiatry has a social role too not just has a medical one to control women when they don't show conformity.

Treatment methods used to heal described as a routine use of sedation claims how institutional control was seen as natural. Kaysen reveals this topic when she says: "*Pills came in little cups, slid under the door like communion wafers, meant to pacify, not to heal*" (Kaysen, p. 73). This quote creates an image of symbolic ritual of submission, with the help of the phrase "communion wafers" which suggests an unquestioned obedience. Especially for female patients, sedation was not just a tool to dull symptoms but to suppress any emotional expression that was a challenge to expected norms of the system. The system tried to silence and punish patients instead of treating them, yet this oppressed environment created a new reality that Kaysen and other female patients begin to express themselves in their own ways. All in all, psychiatric care upheld restrictive gender stereotypes and functioned as a mechanism for suppressing women's autonomy by privileging obedience and sedation.

Kaysen shows the double standards in the system -caused by gender norms- between female and male patients by contrasting how they are treated and perceived in the institution. She

reveals “*They knew what was best. I was only supposed to comply*” (Kaysen, p. 89) a line that shows the institution’s expectations from a woman. The phrase “only supposed to comply” reflects the passive acceptance of female patients, while the word “they” which is authoritative highlights the unquestioned power of the male. Women patients were seen as they are guilty and disciplined for any display of independence, whereas male often treated as individuals that have potential for recovery. A study from NYU says “men were often treated as individuals capable of rehabilitation, while women were framed as inherently unstable” (Wood, 2001, p. 7) shows this imbalance noting how traits such as ambition, sexual expression and anger were recorded as symptoms in women-which seen as a character trait in men- while silence and compliance were seen as progress. In this way, her memoir reflects psychiatry as arbitrary in method and complicit in reinforcing patriarchal norms through language.

Kaysen criticizes a system that medicalized female autonomy and punished nonconformity by reflecting how psychiatric treatment was shaped by strict gender expectations. In her memoir, she reveals how psychiatry, rather than being an impartial science functioned as a tool of cultural control, especially over women who refused to obey society’s norms. The usage of many literary devices like imagery, rhetorical questions and her restrained tone, Kaysen claims how emotions such as independence and doubt were seen like a sickness to heal when they are expressed by women. Through a feminist view, patients can become emotionally isolated due to the gendered control cause so this even increases the significance the relationships among patients more. These bonds help them to create an individuality within a system that tries to destroy them. However, these bonds may reinforce the emotional dependence among patients since they are formed in an oppressive and cause a challenge for personal freedom. All in all, Kaysen highlights the role of psychiatry through the cultural anxieties surrounding female agency and deepens the reader’s understanding of diagnoses that are often tools used to reinforce gender norms.

Feminism and Female Solidarity's Effect on Women's Mental Health in Oppressive Systems:

In *Girl, Interrupted*, female solidarity is a form of resistance in a system that tries to oppress and silence women. Kaysen claims the hospital as an environment that restricts emotions, while the friendships act as a rebellion to challenge the male dominated authority.

Kaysen recalls: "*We weren't supposed to get close to one another. But we did, and that was our secret*" (Kaysen, p. 127). The opposition between "weren't supposed to" and "we did" conveys the subversion of institutional rules and resistance against authority, while the term "our secret" evokes a space of emotional safety derived from constant surveillance that relationships created. A study from Mount Holyoke points out "solidarity among women in psychiatric memoirs frequently fosters resilience where formal treatment fails" (Holyoke, 2006, p. 34). In the memoir of Kaysen this solidarity takes a form of feminist resistance, reclaiming agency to women casts as passive subjects by the institution.

Word choice of Kaysen reshapes oppression into source of shared identity with the help of tone and diction to overturn psychiatric authority. For example, when she was describing how patients mocked their diagnosis, she recalls: "We turned them into nicknames, because it was better to laugh than to shrink away in shame" (Kaysen, p. 119). "Turned" here shows the change in the patients' perspectives about their diagnoses. Mocking about their own diagnostic labels isn't just a simple event; it is also act of rebellion in a dishonest and oppressive system with the help of the collective identity. By laughing a common thing, the patients begin to become a group that has a common purpose. The dark humour's usage here functions as a coping mechanism and not a denial process. A study claims, women in psychiatric institutions often created alternative systems of meaning that challenged medical authority (Omaha Student

Work, 2010, p. 16). Kaysen's perspective also highlights this idea, and she shows how language can be used to show resistance where institutional control is questioned.

Kaysen generally uses an emotionally detached and distorted tone to address both her psychological state and her disconnection from the reality for example she explains her childhood traumas at one scene and then she moves on to another memory like she was never sad or felt anything. However, when she becomes close with other patients and share a common feeling, her tone becomes more warming like the scene where she and Lisa talks for about their feelings. Another example to this is, when she describes a conversation she says, "We told each other stories in the dark" and this creates an image of intimacy since these stories are not just about spending time, they are about reclaiming their identity in an environment that tries to erase it. In this way shared words in the dark that have right to be heard becomes an act of resistance.

Confinement itself amplifies the feminist power of solidarity. Even though the intentions in the hospital were to isolate patients, it fostered bonds between them that defied control. Kaysen recalls: "*We lived under watch, but in our whispers and laughter, they couldn't touch us*" (Kaysen, p. 133). The contrast between "under watch" and "couldn't touch us" reveals the paradox of power that surveillance restricted their movements, but it couldn't control their spirits. An argument from Wood says, institutions generally tried but failed to erase individuality, instead they produced "subcultures that reasserted identity through community" (Wood, p. 4) In *Girl, Interrupted* solidarity becomes a feminist act of autonomy within systems to silence it.

Between friendships formed by Susanna Kaysen, the one with Lisa stands out most due to the complex mindset of her. Lisa described as "the most hardened" (Kaysen, p.39) of the patients, reckless, dominant and charismatic figure and she affects Kaysen by both dangerous and

empowering ways. Lisa refuses to obey the system, mocks the doctors, escapes from the hospital and all these actions are resistance to male dominated system. These can also be seen as a feminist refusal against expectations from an “ideal” woman. However, her existence sometimes causes other to not progress emotionally. For instance, Kaysen writes “She terrified me frequently, but she also inspired me” (Kaysen, p. 39) and this shows that Lisa puts Kaysen in an unstable mood, but she also gives power to question the institution. The scene when the two escape from the hospital together, the moment feels like freedom. However, after a time Kaysen realizes that Lisa does not help her with her healing process and causes an emotional dependence so she returns to hospital. This reflects both sides of their friendship; it offers emotional rebellion. However, it also puts them in a cycle of dependence and chaos. From a feminist way, Lisa illustrates that female solidarity in an oppressive system is both risky and essential. The shared rebellion among them provide a temporary solution from institutional control but it also blurred boundaries and recovery to unavailable. Their relationship directly related to the research question, since it shows that friendship can be harmful too while coping with problems. Through Lisa’s characterization Kaysen highlights how female friendships can help women to find their own voices but also the same relationships can cause instability.

Unlike Lisa, Georgina and Polly provide more nurturing forms of support. Their relationship with Kaysen is more stable and gentler that helps her to survive in that harsh place.

With her physical scars Polly represents rebellion and pain, “Polly was saintly, and the girls respected her scars” (Kaysen, p. 62) highlights how the suffering Polly experienced was visible and she made the space warmer with her soft voice and attitude toward other patients. On the other hand, Georgina embodies a way to make sense of their confinement. Kaysen notes, “Georgina’s lies were so elaborate they were almost beautiful” (Kaysen, p. 91), and this quote shows that fantasy is an another element that is used by patients to distort reality and create a place where they feel safe. Both these relationships are small, meaningful but important parts

of the recovery. From a feminist perspective, these friendships are acts of resistance in a system that pathologizes women. These girls challenge the roles imposed on them by supporting each other and they create their own emotional world. Due to forming these bonds in an oppressive environment, they cannot fully escape the influence of the system.

All in all, by creating an image where love and care excluded Kaysen reveals that any connection made by human feelings help patients through their healing process. In memoir, solidarity gives them emotional strength and plays an important role in feminist rebellion. However, these bonds can also reinforce dependency and emotional instability. By reshaping the meaning of shame and society's norms and becoming comfort zone of each other, Kaysen and her friends deny the oppressive system that forces them to obey the system's rules. This shows how female solidarity is not just a denial to institutional control, also helps people to regain emotional clarity, their own identity and freedom in an environment that tries to suppress all these three.

Conclusion:

This extended essay examined how female solidarity in *Girl, Interrupted*, affect the search for personal freedom and the mental health of the characters in an oppressive system. With a feminist approach, the friendships in the memoir are reactions to the silencing women by gendered values. and *is* a work that contains both cultural and literary critique of psychiatry in the 1960's, and it shows how medical decisions were based on gendered assumptions and what the society's expectations in that time era were. Even Kaysen's own diagnosis – which is decided after a short conversation – shows how easy it was to label a women as “crazy” in that time era. In a system that tries to destroy individuality solidarity becomes a necessity in a form of emotional survival and with the help of symbolic language, introspective tone and fragmented narrative Kaysen not just shows the brutal structures of the system, but she also gives new meanings to terms like illness and sanity for women.

With the narration of the asylums, Kaysen reflects how medical care functioned as a place for control rather than treatment where discipline replaced therapy and patients were trapped and not listened. The explanation of the oppressive rules and routines of the hospital, readers get an impression that these places are trying to dehumanize people in order to improve nonconformity among patients. Also, the findings about the gendered treatments shows the psychiatry in the 1960s normalized the traditional roles of women. Her experience which is based on being diagnosed after a short and impersonal sectional with a doctor highlight how biased was the system and the decisions. Furthermore, her “symptoms” –like emotional expression and ambition- were actually the features which makes us different and human. Through many literary devices such as rhetorical questions, irony and dark tone Kaysen criticizes a system that tries to shut down individuality of women by misdiagnosing them and categorizing complexity

as illness.

The bonds formed in the asylum reveal the complex structure of solidarity. Georgina and Polly, show the important role of imagination and empathy to help someone to cope with mental problems. On the other hand, Lisa who terrifies and inspires Kaysen, shaped as a character who leads instability but also shows a great rebellion against oppressive system. All these friendships have different roles on women's coping mechanisms against trauma, they shape and sometimes limit a person's life together. By analysing these relationships with a feminist perspective, the essay has revealed that Kaysen uses friendship as a literary device to criticize gendered power structure. These relationships are created by validation among patients who was impressed by each other's experiences and regained their individuality beyond their diagnoses. Kaysen shows that friendships can be both solutions and problems since they can also create emotional dependence.

All in all, friendship and female solidarity in *Girl, Interrupted* are important to show how a women can reshape her own identity within a system that tries to suppress individuality. These relationships are not simple and they are complicated for a patient since they may create both emotional stability and offer other ways for healing, and they may function as emotional lifelines. Kaysen suggests that in an environment that attempts to erase individuality, shared experiences and mutual understanding become essential for preserving a sense of self.

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