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ELAINE'S IDENTITY FORMATION
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *CAT'S EYE*

Bachelor's thesis

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Abstract

The present thesis explores the identity formation process of the protagonist Elaine in Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*. The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze Elaine's identity formation process through her relationship with her childhood best friend and tormentor Cordelia.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters and a conclusion. The introduction gives a short summary of the novel, as well as presents the main aspects that are further discussed in the thesis. The introduction also includes the main aim of the thesis.

The first chapter is a literature review that gives an overview of the main themes in the novel. The chapter discusses the genre of the novel with the terms Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman. Furthermore, the main themes, such as trauma and intersubjectivity, are discussed. Also, the mirror image that permeates the novel is elaborated on.

The second chapter analyses the protagonist's life journey from early childhood to middle age. The chapter is divided into five parts that all discuss different important points in Elaine's identity formation process.

The conclusion provides a summary of the findings.

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Introduction

A person's identity is a construct that takes form, among other factors, by having multiple interactions with different people. All the relationships that people create throughout their lives have some kind of influence on the identity formation process. However, at times, the influence may not be thoroughly positive, and people may need to deal with the negative consequences of this in their later life. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is a great example of how a childhood friendship can dictate a person's life and how their identity formation process happens through the negative relationship.

Many of Atwood's works deal with the identity formation process through the childhood relationships of the characters, especially the relationships with peers and family, which have a long-lasting effect on a person's life. One of the examples can be Atwood's short story *Death by Landscape* that tells a story of a middle-aged woman Lois, who is not able to forget her best friend from a summer camp, after the friend had gone missing. Just after the incident, Lois is blamed for the accident that had happened to her friend. Only in retrospect, Lois manages to find peace and realizes that she was not in fault and she is merely missing the friend and accepting the loss. In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood develops the issue further and writes about a woman who is overwhelmed by her childhood friend's presence during her whole life and identity formation process.

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* opens when the protagonist, Elaine Risley, returns to her hometown, Toronto, for her retrospective art show. The return to her hometown makes her childhood memories resurface and Elaine starts constantly mind-travelling from the present to the past. The reader soon learns that Elaine and her family moved to Toronto when she was eight, after being a family of travelers and not having a set home ground. However, Elaine's transition to the mainstream society does not go effortlessly because she soon meets the girls who begin to make her realize that her background and upbringing are

quite different from those of the others. One of the girls, Cordelia, becomes the main influence in Elaine's identity formation process by affecting Elaine by her own means. This causes Elaine to always connect her life experiences, especially failures, to Cordelia, even after not seeing her for a long period of time. Throughout the novel, Elaine is on a quest to become independent from her childhood memories that keep on dictating her life's choices.

Although Atwood's novel deals with multiple issues, this thesis will focus on the protagonist's close relationship with her childhood friend and tormentor Cordelia. The relationship is taken under consideration because it has a strong impact on Elaine's life. That is why this thesis aims to find answers to the following questions:

- How do Elaine and Cordelia become so closely bound?
- How does Elaine become free of Cordelia's influence?

In order to answer these questions, the first part of the thesis will give a theoretical overview of the main aspects that are relevant to the thesis, such as the genre of Bildungsroman, the concepts of trauma, intersubjectivity and the mirror image. The second part of the thesis focuses on the analysis of the novel, while considering the main themes which were mentioned above. The empirical part does not follow the structure of the novel, meaning that while Atwood had created a so-called fluctuating narrative between the past and the present, this thesis creates a chronological storyline, in order to analyze the protagonist's identity formation process.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is a novel of many themes. This thesis in particular focuses on the identity formation process of the protagonist Elaine through her relationship with her friend Cordelia. In order to provide a substantial basis for the empirical part of this study, four main aspects of the novel are explicated in the following literature review. These include the genre of the novel, trauma, intersubjectivity, and mirror image.

1.1 Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman

When discussing Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*, many critics have come to the conclusion that the novel fits into the genre of Bildungsroman, some have mentioned the novel belonging into the genre of Künstlerroman as well (McWilliams 2007: 27).

Firstly, it is important to define the terms Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman. Ellen McWilliams (2007: 27) provides a concise description of the terms as follows: Bildungsroman is "the novel of development" and Künstlerroman is "the novel of the artist." Carol Osborne (1994: 96) specifies the definition of the genre by adding that the protagonist is a male who in "a linear fashion" tries to achieve independence and freedom. Furthermore, Jill Ehnenn (2017: 7) notes that the ultimate goal is to make the reader see that the protagonist finds a happy ending that is usually accompanied by love or a career.

McWilliams (2017: 6) considers Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as "the core of German tradition of the Bildungsroman." The protagonist of Goethe's novel is described as "the archetype" of the traditional Bildungsroman (McWilliams 2017: 6). Furthermore, the Bildungsroman tradition integrated into the English-language tradition, in which it holds a prominent position. McWilliams (2017: 12) notes that after Jerome H. Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, the importance of writing about the genre significantly increased.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is analyzed as another traditional example of the Bildungsroman (Osborne 1994: 96). Joyce's novel has been a great influence on Atwood's writing, especially following the Künstlerroman tradition (McWilliams 2017: 15).

As has been noted, the traditional Bildungsroman is mainly concerned with the male protagonist, however, authors have selected the same traditional formula to write about female development. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is considered to be as a main example of the female bildungsroman (McWilliams 2017: 17).

Critics have established that Atwood has adapted some of the traditional features of the Bildungsroman into *Cat's Eye*, however, the differences from the genre conventions are noticeable from the very beginning. The traditional Bildungsroman is often described as having a linear narrative (Osborne 1994: 96), but in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood has created "a circular structure" in which she highlights Elaine's constant mind-travel from her childhood to the present (Osborne 1994: 96). However, the circular structure is arranged chronologically from Elaine's childhood to finally reaching the present day in the novel (Osborne 1994: 97).

As noted above, *Jane Eyre* is considered to be a traditional female Bildungsroman, however, Atwood does not write in the realms of the traditional female Bildungsroman either. While *Jane Eyre*'s protagonist finds her "unprecedented level of confidence and self-knowledge" (McWilliams 2017: 18), Elaine does not achieve an outcome that is related to any of the traditional female bildungsroman's ways, such as marrying, giving birth or finding a career (Osborne 1994: 97).

In the traditional Bildungsroman, the quest is mostly a search for the protagonist's own internal happiness and contentment. Atwood follows the same structure and the outcome for Elaine is her achieved self-knowledge that was missing in the beginning of the

novel (Osborne 1994:109). McWilliams (2017: 11-12) notes that even though the understanding of the history of Bildungsroman is necessary, it is also important to bear in mind that the genre is widely known “as a synonym for exploring aspects of human progress and development.” As *Cat’s Eye* has a similar focus, Atwood’s novel can be analyzed as a version of the conventional (female) Bildungsroman, which will be further considered in the empirical part of the thesis.

1.2 Trauma

In addition to fitting into the category of Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, as discussed in the section above, Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* has recognizable features of trauma novel. Trauma is a broad concept that needs to be specified for the purposes of the thesis. Atwood’s novel revolves around the aspects of childhood trauma and all the consequences stemming from the experiences.

Laurie Vickroy (2002: ix) has defined trauma as “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional and cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption.” It may be caused by a singular event or “a constellation of life’s experiences” (Kai Erikson 1991: 457 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 12). In addition, dealing with this particular novel, it is important to define post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well. According to Cathy Caruth (1995: 4) PTSD can be explained by having a sometimes delayed response to overwhelming events “which takes the form of repeated /.../ thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.” The previous mention of “delayed response” is crucial while analyzing the protagonist of Atwood’s novel because her experience has all the characteristics of this particular notion. Sigmund Freud’s term ‘latency’ can be used as

a single term to describe the concept of delayed experience. Latency is described as the time in which the traumatic experience has not become clear (Caruth 1995: 7).

As has become evident from the discussion above, psychological trauma is connected to past events and can be hidden from the person's conscious mind until a certain time when the experience is recalled and becomes a recognized trauma. With this in mind, it is important to find an explanation to the shift in a person's mind. The main argument that needs to be made is related to the aspect of memory, especially the difference between ordinary/narrative and traumatic memory.

Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart (1995: 163) have found that while narrative memory has instances of social elements, traumatic memory is solely one's own. For example, when people are telling about their traumatic experiences in social settings, this memory can be described as narrative (Van der Hart and Van der Kolk 1995: 163). Traumatic experience is exceptional because human's brain processes it differently to other events (Vickroy 2002: 89). Thus, it is possible to conclude that people with traumatic memory are not able to "make sense out of experience," while narrative memory is part of "a completed story in the past" (Janet 1928 quoted in Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 160; Janet quoted in Caruth 1995: 153). In the context of the novel, it is crucial to note that memory can shift from traumatic to narrative over a course of time allowing the memories "to be verbalized and communicated" (Caruth 1995: 153).

As the main terms and instances connected to the subject have been discussed, it is important to analyze the usage of trauma in narratives. Vickroy (2002: 3) has noted that trauma narratives are not only employed to describe the subject and the characters, but they rather serve as a tool to make the reader understand a deeper meaning of the subject matter. Coming back to the subject of the novel under discussion, Vickroy (2002: 4) has stated that trauma narratives are usually connected to "human-made traumatic situations."

In addition, while considering trauma narrative, it is important to discuss the narrative technique in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. As discussed above, trauma is a complex phenomenon that has different stages. Trauma begins with a single event or a series of experiences a person has gone through (Kai Erikson 1991: 457 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 12). Then the experience is followed by a period of latency, during which the consequences of the event are not revealed to the person. However, after some time, the event is recalled due to a stimulus that makes the person realize the occurrences in the past. Following the recollection period, a person starts to work through the event, in order to make sense of the experience. The narrative technique in the novel is similar. Osborne (1994: 97) points out that the narrative considers one of the main ideas of trauma and the novel itself – “nothing goes away.” With this, it is possible to argue that the novel follows the structure of the previously described trauma experience, thus making it a trauma novel.

To conclude, it can be said that Atwood's *Cat's Eye* fits also into the category of trauma novel both by its theme and narration and it is an important aspect that has to be taken into consideration while analyzing the novel in the empirical part of the thesis.

1.3 Intersubjectivity

The issue of intersubjectivity is one of the emerging themes in the novel. The concern is discussed thoroughly by Nancy Chodorow (1999) in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Chodorow (1999) focuses on the subject from the perspective of a mother-daughter relationship which is evident in Atwood's novel as well. Chodorow (1999: 175-176) finds that a girl's identity and her understanding of “what it is to be womanlike” is closely connected to her relationship with her mother. Furthermore, the “female identification process” is closely bound to the mother who the girl has been most involved with in her childhood (Chodorow 1999: 175-176).

However, it is important to note that at a certain time (usually during prepubertal period), the girl becomes critical of her family, and especially of her mother (Chodorow 1999: 137). Consequently, the girl may substitute the mother figure, that had been the ultimate example, with someone else (Chodorow 1999: 137). In the context of the novel, at this point Atwood introduces the girls who succeed into the position of an example for Elaine. Bethan Jones (2008: 30) notes that Elaine first finds Carol and Grace as her role models, as someone who will teach her how to be a girl. Further on in the novel, Cordelia enters and takes her as her mother substitute (Osborne 1994: 102). However, Osborne (1994: 111) states that although Chodorow's work may be helpful in understanding the protagonist of this particular novel, the tendencies may vary according to various factors concerning the girl's background. With that being said, Laura Martocci (2013: 150) indicates the situation where Elaine learns "parts of integral femininity" not from her mother but rather from her friends and their behaviors.

According to Osborne (1994: 102), Elaine implements the girls' way of life so thoroughly that "she loses her own voice and identity." With this, Elaine has developed an identity that is not her own but consists of someone else's beliefs and understandings. As this thesis focuses on the identity formation of Elaine through her relationship with Cordelia, the further implications will be discussed in the empirical part of this thesis.

1.4 Mirror image

The mirror image becomes mostly evident when discussing the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. Various authors have aimed their research to the direction of this concern and thus, it is an important topic to address as one part of the literature review. Jones (2008: 31) shows that the arrival of Cordelia is the point in time where Cordelia and Elaine become "inextricably bound and interchangeable." This notion can be described as one of the manifestations of mirroring characters. Furthermore, Jones (2008: 37) finds that

the novel is set up in a way that the effect is presented to the reader before the cause. This particular technique may be considered as part of the mirroring in a sense that the effect mirrors the cause.

According to Nicole DeJong (1998: 99), the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia can be primarily characterized by “mirror images that divide them into Self and Other, Subject and Object, or two halves of a twin.” In like manner, Martocci (2013: 158) finds that both girls are responsible for the creation of the other’s self and in the process both girls act as a mirror to each other, “both are victim and victimizer; subject and object.” Osborne (1994: 98) finds that Elaine is closely bound to Cordelia in her later life as well, mostly because with every aspect of her life, she “projects her own concerns onto the image of Cordelia.” Thus, it is important to consider the mutual influences while analyzing the novel further on in the thesis.

2. ELAINE’S JOURNEY TO BECOMING INDEPENDENT

Introduction

In the empirical part of this thesis, the identity formation process of Elaine is analyzed. Since Elaine’s identity is closely linked to her childhood friend Cordelia, the process is akin to their relationship. The thesis views the process as a journey, categorizing important markers of Elaine’s identity formation process as stops on her route to become independent of her childhood reminders.

Even though the book has a narrative that fluctuates between present and past, the analysis of the novel will put the events in the order of happening. This decision has been made because it is necessary to reconstruct Elaine’s journey to becoming independent. Atwood creates a distinct narrative structure by making the protagonist in the narrative present have multiple recollections of her childhood and the time in her previous hometown Toronto.

2.1 The first acquaintance

2.1.1 The environment

Elaine's journey begins when her family moves to Toronto. Up until this point they had been a family who travel and move a lot, mainly because Elaine's father is a scientist. Jones (2008: 30) notes that Elaine has this so-called "rootless existence" which means that during her childhood she has not had a persistent place or group of people around her. Even though Elaine had her family, the new environment is unique because previously she had not acquainted with girls and she had not had a proper home. "Our parents say we're going to our new house. This time the house will be really ours, not rented" (Atwood 1998: 34, hereafter *CE*: 34).

As Elaine's family used to move and not have a single home, Elaine had never gone to a traditional school. In Toronto, she has to go to a school that in itself is a new environment but in addition it is a Catholic girls-only school. Both of these things are new to her because her family is not religious, and she has never been friends with other girls before. For those reasons, according to Osborne (1994: 101), "Elaine finds herself an outsider." Even though she belongs to the same middle-class society, she finds very soon how different she and her family is from the rest of the people surrounding her.

2.1.2 The girls

This part is overlapping in a sense with the girls-only school aspect. As going to a traditional school was a new experience for Elaine, she had never spent time with girls. Elaine had grown up with her brother and the new girl-world was new to her. At school she first meets Carol Campbell and Grace Smeath, next year Cordelia. Elaine's meeting with Cordelia is considered to be the time when Elaine and Cordelia become closely bound to each other (Jones 2008: 31). It can be considered as the start of these two characters

mirroring each other. While the mirroring process continues, the pair becomes more connected and influenced by one another.

While Cordelia is an important character in Elaine's identity formation process, it is important to give a brief background on Cordelia. Intertexts, such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which form an important aspect of Atwood's novel, are not the focus of this thesis. However, an awareness of it definitely allows to elaborate better on the character of Cordelia. Jones (2008: 36) finds that Cordelia has a "dysfunctional relationship with her father." To elaborate on this concern, Cordelia is often left behind at home, her older sisters are preferred by their father. While Cordelia is not in the power position at home, she seeks it elsewhere. Conveniently, the friendship with Elaine provides Cordelia control in another sphere and this may be the cause for her cruel behavior. From the perspective of mirroring, which is one of the main aspects of this thesis, it is obvious that the more suppressed Cordelia is at home, the more cruelties she exercises on Elaine.

Elaine's relationship with Carol, Grace and Cordelia is important in her growing process because she forms a relationship with the girls, a new kind of relationship, a girl friendship. She is acquainted with the new rules and traditions in the girl world, however, Osborne (1994: 102) notes that her behavior with the girls is not thoroughly honest. Elaine feels, after realizing she is different that she needs "to play a part so that she can fit in with her girlfriends" (Osborne 1994: 102). She starts to play games and want things that she has not wanted before. For example, Elaine realizes one Christmas that she had asked for a Barbara Ann Scott doll. However, Elaine soon understands that it is something which she really did not want or need. It was something she had seen in a newspaper and she had to want something. "For Christmas I get a Barbara Ann Scott Doll, which I've said I wanted. I had to say I wanted something and I did in a way want this doll" (*CE*: 141).

Her new desires reflect clearly that Elaine finds the girls as her new role models. Jones (2008: 30) supports this idea by noting that “She adopts Carol and Grace as role models: for her they represent the pathway to the acquisition of her own femininity.” Until then, Elaine had only dreamt of the girl-world and “having a relationship with someone like herself” (Osborne 1994: 101). However, as noted in the last section, Elaine finds after befriending girls that she is different than the rest.

The new outlook on herself through the eyes of girls is crucial in Elaine’s identity formation process mainly because her sense of self shifts as she spends more time with the girl group. Similarly, with the new environment around her, Elaine starts to realize that she is different. However, the changes that are happening to her personality are not inflicted by her, the changes are coming from an outer source, from the girls and their ideas for Elaine.

2.2 The games

2.2.1 The catalogue browsing

In the context of the novel, the browsing of *Eaton’s Catalogue* can be considered a game because it is one of the favorite pastimes for Carol, Grace and Cordelia. The girls browse catalogues, cut out their favorite things and glue them into their scrapbooks. This activity is important because during this game Elaine realizes that she begins to want things that others want, not the things she would necessarily want or need, or be interested in. She starts to express the overpowering want to fit into the world of girls: “I begin to want things I’ve never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse of my own. Something is unfolding, being revealed to me. I see that there’s a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all” (*CE*: 59).

As Elaine had never had a close relationship with her mother, she soon substitutes her mother figure with Cordelia. By this time, Elaine had realized that she and her family

are different, thus, she tries to separate herself from her family, in order to fit in better with the girls. This can be explained by what Chodorow (1999: 137) has argued about mother-daughter relationship that girls may often become critical of their mothers and thus, finding a mother-substitute in another female who portrays the preferred qualities better in their mind. The catalogue browsing may be the point in time when the shift happens. Mainly because Elaine's mother does not fit in with the other girls' parents. She sees how the other girls' mothers look a lot more like the women in *Eaton's Catalogue*. Elaine's mother does not wear matching outfits and is not the regular housewife that Elaine encounters in the new environment being surrounded by the girls. Furthermore, Elaine's mother is rather indifferent towards her and does not express her feelings about Elaine's new friend group. This can be explained by Chodorow (1999: 137) as well because she has stated that after girls feeling their mothers being ambivalent towards them, they try to break away from the bond and find a substitute. Consequently, Elaine finds Cordelia to be a fitting mother substitute.

As noted in the previous section, Elaine's identity formation process was not thoroughly internal, the changes were inflicted by the other three girls and mainly, Cordelia. The catalogue browsing is important in Elaine's journey because it is another instance of the girls implementing their desires on her, thus forming Elaine's identity in the direction of them.

2.2.2 The burying game

Carol, Grace and Cordelia lower Elaine into a deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. The girls are playing "Mary, Queen of Scots, headless already" (*CE*: 115). Elaine is lowered into the hole and the girls cover it with wooden boards and push dirt on them. Elaine describes this as "When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one" (*CE*: 115-116). Lyn Mikel Brown (1995: 291) finds that this is the moment

Elaine loses her identity that had formed thus far. Elaine describes the event as “I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it’s only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power” (*CE*: 116). Elaine’s description can be a clear marker of why this event is important for her identity formation process. It can be described as her first traumatic experience related to the girls. Mainly because Elaine described the incident with ‘time before and time after’. After the experience, Elaine learns to disguise her feelings from the girls, hoping that this would protect her from the cruelties (Osborne 1994: 104). However, Elaine still calls Cordelia her best friend and does not let go of her need to belong.

2.2.3 The ravine

This is a pivotal moment in Elaine’s journey. The girls walk home after school and while running Cordelia trips. Elaine laughs at this incident and Cordelia decides to punish her for it. She throws Elaine’s hat in the ravine, commanding her to go down the ravine, a place that is known as dangerous and forbidden for the girls. to get it. Elaine has to go down the ravine because she cannot return home without it – her mother would start asking too many questions. She descends into the ravine, but she falls through the ice. Elaine suffers an almost near-death experience. Jones (2008: 40) says that this is “a transitional point between domination and release.” Even though Elaine sets herself free from the group, Cordelia remains as a companion in her memory. Martocci (2013: 152) notes that it may be because Elaine realizes that the cruelties were approved by adults and “adults are privy to her secret unworthiness.”

2.3 The reversed roles

As previously discussed, Elaine sets herself free from the girl group after the ravine incident. After middle school Elaine enters the same high school that Cordelia goes to and

their bond continues because of that. However, during that time, Elaine finds that she is stronger and more indifferent to her peers (Ahern 1993: 15).

2.3.1 Burnham High School

The main argument that has to be made about Elaine's behavior in high school is that she has developed "a mean mouth" (Ahern 1993: 15; *CE*: 257). "I have such a mean mouth that I become known for it. I don't use it unless provoked, but then I open my mean mouth and short, devastating comments come out of it" (*CE*: 257). Ahern (1993: 15) assumes that Elaine's action can be explained by her need to belong with her peers or "as a way of covering up her insecurity."

During high school, series of incidents happen that indicate that Elaine has become stronger and more independent. After another afternoon spent with Cordelia, Elaine expresses her feelings about their friendship, referring back to the times when Cordelia held power over her: "/.../ energy has passed between us, and I am stronger." (256) Martocci (2013: 156) agrees that Elaine has now become the stronger participant in their relationship by saying that Elaine often uses sarcasm in order to secure her current position among her peers. "Sometimes Cordelia can think of things to say back, but sometimes she can't. She says, "That's cruel." Or she sticks her tongue in the side of her mouth and changes the subject" (*CE*: 259). With this this sense of being stronger, Elaine develops a "mean mouth", an almost bully-like behavior (Ahern 1993: 15). Stephen Ahern (1993: 15) expresses that Elaine's mean mouth acts as a tool to conceal her insecurities and makes herself fit in the society better.

Judith McCombs (1991: 16) finds that this shift in their relationship is another indicator of the girls' mirroring relationship. Elaine and Cordelia are unable to be in the powering position at the same time, the girls are constantly mirroring each other's actions throughout their life (McCombs 1991: 16). The same notion is expressed by Ahern (1993:

15) who adds that the girls “represent the disparate parts of each other’s fragmented identity.” Thus, it is possible to say that despite Elaine being stronger in her own mind, her connection to Cordelia is still strong and her childhood memories are still with her.

2.3.2 The Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home

Cordelia is admitted to The Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home, which is a mental hospital, because of her attempted suicide. Even though Elaine and Cordelia have lost their connection, Cordelia calls Elaine to ask her to visit her in the hospital. While visiting, Elaine notices the vulnerable side of Cordelia “There’s a frantic child in there, behind that locked, sagging face” (CE: 391), she feels herself being free of the power of Cordelia. However, after her visit Elaine writes Cordelia a note, it gets sent back to her and Elaine realizes that “She could be anywhere” (CE: 393). After Elaine’s realization, her memories start slowly surfacing. This may be the point in Elaine’s life that leads her to the next stage – the low point.

2.4 The low point

2.4.1 Suicide attempt

After her time in high school and art school, Elaine still struggles with her past. While Elaine was having troubles with her paintings, being a new mother and in her marriage, “considering her life in ruin” (Osborne 1994: 107), she decides to attempt a suicide. However, the act was initiated by Cordelia’s voice in Elaine’s head. “This is when I hear a voice, not inside my head at all but in the room, clearly: *Do it. Come on. Do it.* This voice doesn’t offer a choice it has the force of an order. It’s the difference between jumping and being pushed” (CE: 408). It is a clear indication of Elaine’s inoccupation with her childhood friend whose power she thought she had escaped from. McCombs (1991: 16) finds that Elaine’s suicide attempt may be mirroring Cordelia’s earlier action which led her to be admitted to the mental hospital. This also gives another strong indication that

after visiting Cordelia in the hospital, Elaine became more aware of her childhood cruelties and made her act the same as did Cordelia.

Later, after having gone to the emergency room, she realizes “It wasn’t a frightening voice, in itself. Non menacing but excited, as if proposing an escapade, a prank, a treat. Something treasured, and secret. The voice of a nine-year-old child” (CE: 409). This is an important instance because Elaine verbalizes her mind’s occupation with Cordelia. She realizes that after many years Cordelia is still with her, occupying her mind.

2.4.2 Moving to Vancouver

To continue, Elaine’s realization of Cordelia’s presence makes her understand that Cordelia is present until she lives in their childhood playground, Toronto. (Osborne 1994: 107) In addition, Elaine’s marriage is in ruins. One of the main issues that Elaine finds in her relationship with Jon is that Jon tries to conform her under his norms (Martocci 2013: 156). This instance has similarities with Elaine’s childhood when she did not fit in the society. Subsequently, her insecurities and inadequacies are proceeded to her adult life. While Jon tries to make Elaine as a traditional housewife and mother, Elaine’s mind starts rebelling and she is not able to conform to those expectations. She decides to move away from her husband in Toronto, taking her daughter Sarah with her. While travelling to her new hometown, Vancouver, she thinks about home. “*Home*, I think. But it’s nowhere I can go back to” (CE: 412). This is important to her journey because Elaine has reached a point where she does not have a real place to go. She is not able to return to her husband and her childhood home is not real home because of the cruelties experienced in childhood.

“Toronto lies behind it, at a great distance, burning in thought like Gomorrah. At which I dare not look” (CE: 418).

2.5 The return

The ‘return’ in this part of the thesis has to be understood on two different levels. Firstly, the return to Elaine’s mother when her mother is already old and very sick. The second return brings the discussion in thesis to the narrative present of the novel – the time of Elaine’s retrospective art show in Toronto. During this stay she makes a return to a significant place from her childhood.

2.5.1 Return to Elaine’s mother

The first ‘return’ episode is more of an emotional journey. When Elaine’s mother has become older, Elaine travels to her mother’s home to help her out with everyday tasks. During her stay, Elaine’s mother starts the conversation about Elaine’s childhood many times, making Elaine realize that her mother did not approve of the cruelties that were happening when Elaine was friends with Cordelia and the others. Elaine and her mother go to the cellar in order to sort through some things. While going through their joint memories, Elaine finds a marble that she used to collect in her childhood, with that Elaine becomes aware of her life until this time: “I look into it, and see my life entire” (*CE*: 434). To add, while in the cellar, she realizes that she has a renewed connection with her mother: “I’m aware of a barrier between us. It’s been there for a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back” (*CE*: 434). Osborne (1994: 108) finds that both the conversations and Elaine’s discovery in the cellar, brings her to realize that she has forgiven her mother her assumed indifference towards Elaine’s bullies. This is mostly because Elaine has recalled her memories due to series of events back with her mother. As discussed above, recollection of memories is part of trauma experience that Elaine has suffered from her childhood. While Elaine realizes that there is a distance between the pair, she acknowledges the fact that her mother has cared for her the

whole time. The distance was created because her mother was not able to conform to the new society and Elaine quickly found a substitute.

The above occurrence can be further analyzed by applying Chodorow's (1999) theory of mother-daughter relationship. As has been previously argued, Elaine finds a mother-substitute in Cordelia in her childhood. However, when Elaine returns home to her mother and she renews the mother-daughter bond, her powerful connection to Cordelia starts to decrease. Due to Elaine understanding her mother and being able to realize that her mother did not approve of the cruelties, Elaine makes another step towards disconnecting herself from Cordelia's grasp.

2.5.2 The return to Toronto

The second return in this part of the thesis is firstly, a physical one, and secondly, it is a return that connects Atwood's timeline with the one constructed in this thesis. As mentioned above, Elaine returns to her hometown, Toronto, for her art show. While in Toronto, she revisits the places that make her recall memories from her childhood, and thus, help to work through her trauma connected to Cordelia.

After Elaine's art show proving to be a success, she returns to her childhood neighborhood and the ravine where she had experienced the initial alienation from Cordelia. While at the ravine, Elaine imagines seeing Cordelia and while she is seeing her, she has her last (imagined) conversation with Cordelia:

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were.
I am the older one now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here any longer, she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late.
I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now.* (CE: 459)

However, Elaine soon realizes that she was imagining Cordelia in the ravine. After having the last conversation with Cordelia, and saying goodbye to her, Elaine can admit that Cordelia is not present anymore: "There is nothing more for me to see. The bridge is

only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky. This landscape is empty now, a place for Sunday runners. Or not empty: filled with whatever it is by itself, when I'm not looking" (*CE*: 460). Osborne (1994: 110) finds that Elaine's story, as many other of Atwood's, puts the memory in the maturation process in focus. Similarly with Elaine's return to her mother, the coming back to Toronto has made Elaine recall her childhood. As a result of the recollection, Elaine is able to free herself from Cordelia and her childhood trauma connected to her 'best friend.' Furthermore, the letting go of Cordelia would not have been possible without Elaine's renewed connection to her mother that was discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

Conclusion

The protagonist Elaine Risley's development in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* attracts attention to various important issues in today's society, such as bullying, complicated family relationships, and mental health. In addition, Elaine's story is a journey of a relationship that consumes her whole life, from the moment her family moves to Toronto and she meets Cordelia. The aim of this thesis was to explore how Elaine and Cordelia became closely bound and how Elaine managed to become free of Cordelia's influence.

Elaine and Cordelia developed close ties through various affecting factors. First of all, there is their somewhat similar family background. While Elaine comes from a family who had not had a set home, Cordelia's family is more traditional in that sense. However, Cordelia is suppressed at home and does not get enough attention from her father which leads her to taking control in relationships outside her home. Since Elaine is surrounded by a new environment and customs, she is susceptible to the peer pressure and the cruelties. Another aspect that takes Cordelia's influence even further is the fact that she becomes a mother substitute for Elaine. When Elaine sees in the new surroundings that her mother does not conform to the traditional woman-like figures she has now met, Elaine substitutes her own mother with her tormentor Cordelia. These aspects cause the lives of Elaine and Cordelia to become intertwined.

Even though Elaine was subject to bullying also by the other girls in their group in the elementary school, Cordelia's influence was the strongest. This is emphasized through the mirror image that permeates the novel. Elaine and Cordelia are two mirroring characters who were merged together through their shared experience and somewhat similar backgrounds. While Elaine was an outsider in the society, Cordelia was left out in her home sphere. Their common experience of exclusion and lack of recognition made the

characters mirror each other. Moreover, Elaine suffered from Cordelia's presence in her later life, even after not being near Cordelia.

The change starts to occur when Elaine returns to her hometown, Toronto and revisits the places that remind her of the childhood experiences. At first, she is not able to verbalize her thoughts but when she visits her mother, her childhood materializes, and she becomes aware of the cruelties and her involvement with Cordelia. While having a conversation with her mother, Elaine realized that her childhood trauma was not approved by her, and thus, she was able to let go of the past and the close bond with Cordelia that had underlain her life until middle age. That was possible because Elaine was able to recognize the traumatic experience that had happened in her childhood and managed to liberate herself from her childhood tormentor by the end of the novel.

As a person's identity formation process is a journey, accompanied by various people, Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is a true testament to this statement. Elaine's identity was formed as a result of two main relationships – one with her mother and another with Cordelia. At first, Elaine was forced to substitute Cordelia as her mother which caused Elaine's ultimate surrender to Cordelia's cruelties. However, after years of processing the traumatic experiences from her childhood, Elaine was able to reconnect with her mother and wholly detach herself from Cordelia. With this, Elaine's identity was fully formed, only after coming back to the core relationship that had begun the whole journey.

While writing the thesis, the reconstructing of the order of the events of Elaine's life story appeared to be the best approach for this particular study. Since the thesis dealt with the protagonist's identity formation process, it had to be shown how Elaine grew and evolved into the person that we see in the end of the novel. While Atwood's own technique of storytelling fluctuates between the past and the present narratives, this thesis put the story in a chronological order. While doing so, a gap in the existing reception became

evident. The part of the novel which discussed Cordelia's admission to the Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home has received no attention from the critics. With this thesis, I have added my own analysis of this part of the novel. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* has various themes that are interesting to explore further. One of the topics that could be studied is the literary intertexts in the novel, such as William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Maria Roberta Org

Elaine's Identity Formation in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

Elaine'i identiteedi kujunemine Margaret Atwoodi romaanis *Kassisilm*

Bakalaureusetöö

2019

Lehekülgede arv: 28

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas kujuneb Margaret Atwoodi romaani *Kassisilm* peategelase Elaine Risley identiteet läbi tema suhte oma lapsepõlvesõbra ja kiusaja Cordeliaga. Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest.

Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate teosest ning sõnastab töö eesmärgid ja uurimisküsimused. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade. See käsitleb Atwoodi romaani kuuluvust arenguromaanide ja kunstnikuromaanide žanrisse ning teoses esinevaid peamisi teemasid, milleks on trauma ja intersubjektiivsus, samuti peegelpildi-kujundit. Teine peatükk, romaani analüüs, on jagatud viide alapeatükki, mis on üles ehitatud Elaine'i eluloo kronoloogiale, et uurida tema elukäiku mõjutanud tegureid. Töö tulemusena selgus, et Elaine'i identiteedi kujunemise juures mängib enim rolli tema suhe Cordeliaga, kelle mõju alt välja tulemise jaoks oli tal vaja pöörduda tagasi kodupaika, et vaadata oma minevikule tagasi ja saada kinnitust, et Cordeliaga seotud kiusamine on jäänud minevikku.

Märksõnad: Margaret Atwood, arenguromaan, kunstnikuromaan, trauma, intersubjektiivsus, peegelpildi-kujund.

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