

ENGLISH – LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE ESSAY

Kennedy's stories in *Like a House on Fire* show individuals who claim their identity through adversity. To what extent do you agree?

A contemporary anthology of short stories, Cate Kennedy's *Like a House on Fire* allows for a thorough examination of what it means to be human, recognisable to all, but illuminated and dissected by Kennedy's brilliant writing to become a story worth telling. This deep and considered exploration constructs an image of identity and how it is carved from one's experiences. Such momentous experiences can result through trying circumstances or through purposeful rebellion, or even a discovery of an ability one held all along. By additionally contemplating what it means to be without an identity allows her to present it as an essential component of the human soul.

Certainly, difficulties in life mould a person's character and can even act as a catalyst for one to discover themselves. This is illustrated through the protagonist in *Flexion*, Mrs Slovak, who is able to make the most out of her husband Frank's tragic accident that could have otherwise incinerated their already brittle relationship. Throughout the story, Kennedy elucidates clear discontentment in the protagonist and Frank's marriage – Mrs Slovak recalls with bitter sentiment how his 'every emotion' had been 'withheld from her for the last eighteen years', how he had forced her to 'put [her miscarriage] behind them' and always 'find[ing] a way to smack her out of the way'. However, using the muscle exercises Frank has to undergo as an analogy to their marriage, Kennedy illuminates a path for them to 'keep the memory of [it] alive' and prevent it from 'tightening and atrophying away' through 'flexion': allowing for a gentle give and take, for both to bend to the other's needs. Mrs Slovak recognises this and 'finally reaches over and takes [Frank's] hand' to 'traverse' the 'terrible treasonous distance between them'. Frank's accident therefore provided the two a chance to reclaim their love for each other and reassume their roles as husband and wife. *Sleepers*, perhaps less drastically, depicts suffering through the imagery of night time, seen in similes ('innocuous as a moon' and 'black as space') and the telescope Ray looks through, but it is the 'oxygen [...] prickling like stars' that essentially allows him to 'clear his fogged head', implying that it was the same domineering force that allowed him to live life with a renewed vigour.

Kennedy also depicts defying authority as a powerful way to find a sense of agency. The protagonist in *Laminex and Mirrors*, despite being reprimanded multiple times for talking to patients, goes 'way beyond any casual fraternising [she] could explain away' to allow an old man on his 'last legs' to enjoy freedom on one of his last days. This act of defiance against her boss to do what she thinks is right gives her the moment she 'remember[s] most clearly from the year [she] turned eighteen: the two of [them] content', thus suggesting that her refusal to abide by regulations she does not believe in is what allows her to find herself. Under similar strict expectations, although this time from a disapproving mother's eye, are sisters Anna and Louise in *Whirlpool*. When forced to pose for a family photo, for the purpose of emulating their nuclear family status, a 'reckless moment' passes between the two girls and they both refuse to smile, the act of alleged rebellion making them realise what they are capable of; small acts against their oppressive and 'proprietary' mother who denies Anna's need of a training bra out of 'terror', so that they can claim an identity for themselves outside of her narrow minded views.

Additionally, a realisation of one's capability also serves as a pathway for Kennedy's characters to discover their potential. Previously weighed down by her 'useless' boyfriend, believing that she was reliant on him and 'needed him', Michelle in *Five-Dollar Family* has a sudden awareness of her own strength as she 'marvel[s]' at her ability to give birth. This pushes into momentum her becoming independent and to be able to 'hang up on' her

boyfriend as she welcomes her role as a single mother. Comparable to this is Tyler and Ellie's mother in *Seventy-Two Derwents*, who Kennedy implies as negligent, who, when her partner Shane threatens to 'kill' Tyler – she stabs him with scissors and suddenly 'she wasn't like a doll anymore'. The symbolism behind this lies in the scissors, which, apart from protecting her family, becomes the source of her income and hence a source of independency, as well as an act of triumph from the success of her dolls that she makes with her scissors. This restores her faith within herself and what ultimately restores in her the ability to protect her children, to reclaim her identity as a mother.

Conversely, Kennedy uses characters who have lost their identity to highlight the vitalness of it in order for the human spirit to thrive. The text *Little Plastic Shipwreck* demonstrates this through the character Liz, who has major brain trauma after an accident. Her husband watches on hopeless at her listlessness, the 'want' having been 'taken out of her' and her mental state being compared to fish 'swimming around in circles'. Her clear loss of self, stemming from the accident, contrasted against characters in other stories who have found their agency, demonstrates identity as a core pillar for individuality.

Kennedy's collection champions the diversity and resilience of a person's identity, as she explores the remarkability of those that are able to find themselves as they experience hardships, as they take risks for a higher purpose and as they themselves discover their resiliency. The harrowing result of one's identity being removed only serves to further accentuate the beauty of the extraordinary and elusive human identity.