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Girl, Interrupted

“Girl, Interrupted” is an autobiography by Susanna Kaysen depicting her two years living in a mental hospital called Claymoore. Throughout the novel, several questions are raised regarding mental health as well as different methods to treat it.

The largest question of mental illness is its presence: what exactly is a mental illness? The most common answer is “a mind that does not function in society” and this response is stated to Kaysen throughout the novel several times. However, Kaysen argues with a set meaning. Who is to say one mind does not function as well as another if everyone is different? While there are cases like autism and down-syndrome that cause patients difficulty in performing day-to-day activities independently, is there a model of a person is to behave? In Kaysen’s case, she recalls how she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder after she attempted suicide and noted that time seemed to be standing still. Certainly, she has a few issues, but the reason she was instated initially to Claymoore was that she did not wish to go to college or start a family. Her doctor and parents believed that she was unstable to be around other people because she refused to follow the path expected of her. Due to this case, mental illness itself may have been a creation to marginalize those who stray from the social norm, in order to not upset the flow of modern times. If her parents had accepted her desire to remain a widow and not achieve higher education, she would never have been sent to the psychiatric institution. The mental strain

and emotional distress from being there would have never occurred. Meaning that society not only creates mental illness, but they enforce it as a method to keep outliers under control.

Within her stay, Kaysen meets an array of patients, each with a different diagnosis. Each of them displays their own unique symptoms. For example, Lisa, a woman Kaysen befriends in Claymoore, is designated as a 'sociopath' for being somewhat manipulative and refusing to listen to others. Polly, Kaysen's other friend, is a schizophrenic who can commonly be found having imaginary arguments with no one in particular. These two vastly differ, with each representing how wide of a spectrum mental illness is. Given that mental health has only begun to be researched within the last 70 years, it is understandable so little is known about; therefore, trying to package mental health into one specific concept is difficult. This also applies to treatment as well. With a large scope and small research, effectively dealing with a mental illness has been an imposing challenge. Kaysen reminisces how the 60's were such a different time, where mental illness was seen as a new surge in psychology. The nurses that tend to the patients commonly do not communicate with them, nor do they seem to understand how to treat their patients as patients, and not as mistakes. The doctors misinterpret the girls' cries for help as either attention-seeking or meaningless lies. More often than not, the girls are kept on a tight leash with strict rules and almost endless surveillance. Though this eventually drives the girls to become somewhat unhinged, the doctors and nurses at the time did not fully grasp the idea of what they were dealing with. By always keeping an eye on the patients, they hope to gain a better understanding of what was occurring and how to fix it. Despite being seen as the antagonists of the novel, they truly did wish to help the patients, though their method was not correct.

And though the book accurately depicts the process of feeling insane, garnering a sympathetic viewpoint, the main appeal is fascination. It is rather astonishing the manner mental

illness is treated, as well as the dichotomy between the resentful patients who despise society for branding them as malfunctioning, and the clueless aides who desire to help but cannot understand the women at all. Given the timeframe of her story, it's not surprising that there is a hidden element of wonderment. After all, *what is* a dysfunctional human? How does one help one to become 'operational'? This question pops up in many chapters and the women - sometimes even the nurses - wonder what is real and what is a social construct. Perhaps the answer is left vague so that the reader can devise their own reasoning. Or perhaps it's vague just because it's vague: that there are no set limitations on what a mental illness is.

The autobiography and unconventional method the story is told represents the moral overall. The events do not take place in chronological order, and some instances appear to be fabricated by Kaysen's mind. Though that can be said for all of humanity, since time itself is an illusion created by people. After all, in Kaysen's perspective, who's to say one is more of person than the other?