

# The outcast essay



In our lives we are constantly and naturally reaching out to connect with others.

We only have a short time here on Earth, and we strive to share it – but everything comes with a price. In *Celia Behind Me*, the author Isabel Huggan, through a sensitive and blunt retrospective first person narrative, perceptive characterization, extensive use of ironies and compelling images, illustrates the excruciating mischief and distress caused by the psychological and social confinement imposed on us, as we persistently attempt to integrate with the bourgeois, or the majority. The author sets the stage for this consistent mood of horror and distress by employing a retrospective first person narrative. To begin with, the story is told in a rather childish, yet disturbingly blunt and practical manner. As a nine year-old girl, Elizabeth is still too callow and unsophisticated to hide her emotions.

More than once, she exposed her naked hatred towards Celia with a tone filled with bitterness and hot wrath: “ I thought things over, I hated Celia with a dreadful and absolute passion. ” Upon the first glance, Elizabeth’s attitude towards this poor diabetic child is deeply intriguing. What could possibly have been said or done by Celia to trigger such a violent abhorrence in her? Though Elizabeth’s loath towards Celia didn’t subside as the plot unfolds – it was consistent throughout, it became perfectly reasonable later in the story: “ Terror of terrors that they won’t be scared...

knotting fear that they’d find out or guess what she’d really said and throw millions of snowballs just for the joy of seeing me whipped... I visualized that scene all winter. ” Being itself a rather cynical remark, this excerpt also

conveys a distressful and uneasy mood – not just at one point, but taunting and evolving all the way to the end.

As the story is told in retrospect, every piece of Elizabeth’s memory is tainted with a spell of fear and horror. And perhaps one could easily identify the source of it. It comes from the fear of not being accepted by the majority: “ For I knew, deep in my wretched heart, that it were not for Celia I was next in line for humiliation. ” It is the fear of humiliation which compels Elizabeth to victimize Celia.

She sees teasing Celia as the only tool to help here integrate. Furthermore, she is not the only one in the story who does that. Huggan has constructed the story in a way so that such fear and mischief can be seen on almost every character. To begin with, the characterization of Elizabeth’s parents is incisive and perceptive. Being pressurized under the bourgeois, they are but another group of people attempting to integrate into the clique of the majority.

They are not true parents. They did what they did because it was the “ right” thing to do: “...

they became so soured by their own shame that they slapped my stinging buttocks for personal revenge as much as for any rehabilitative purposes. I’ll never be able to lift my head on this street again. ” Throughout the entire story, Elizabeth’s parents never offered her any sympathy or understanding. All they craved is their images – so that they could lift their heads on the street.

Hiding behind their simple motives is again the compelling fear and distress of being an outcast. Irony is also extensively and effectively used throughout the story. As people in the story attempt to find a sense of belonging, as they fight fiercely and ferociously for their place in the society, love and understanding is seldom offered. Picturing a group of kids walking home, one may conceive a fun, loving environment, and be blinded from seeing the darker side.

Huggan, however, unveils the ugly and the callous. Instead of seeing Celia and Elizabeth being a part of the group and live “happily ever after”, we are shown a very real world. We are shown that it is alienation, not love that bonds a group of people together. ‘You just remember every word I said,’ she said, ignoring every word I’d said.’ And if I see one more snowball thrown in her direction, by you or by anybody else, I’m coming right out there and spanking you in front of them all.

” As it turns out, Elizabeth’s mother remains the most ironic figure in the story. Though she tries to establish her righteous status in the society by preventing Celia from being teased, little does she care about anyone but herself. In her conversation with (or lecture to) Elizabeth, she incessantly and presumptuously uses verbal threat, an ineffective tool that offers no understanding – Elizabeth wouldn’t understand the reason behind it and hatred, as it is seen later in the story, would accumulate within her, mingled with confusion. One of the most striking ironies, however, comes in the verbal form at the end of the story, “She’d been half-carried, half-dragged home by the heroic others, and given pills and attention and love.” Hardly

can we imagine that these “heroic” people are the same ones who pushed Celia and Elizabeth away from social acceptance.

As it turns out, the entire story is one giant comic irony, telling the readers the inevitable gap between love and reality, and the idea that one can never escape from the social confinements around him. Lastly, Huggan enhanced this message with strong and menacing images which emotionally triggers response within the readers, “Wild, appreciative laughter from the chocolate-tongued mob, and they turned their backs on us... They had to take off their mitts and lick their fingers to pick up the last fragments from the foil.” This compelling image ultimately displays the fact that almost everyone in the society achieves acceptance, or in this case, “respect”, through victimizing others.

Along with victimization comes grievance and sorrow, comes horror and fear, and comes distress and harm. Through a sensitive and blunt retrospective first person narrative, perceptive characterization, extensive use of ironies and compelling images, Isabelle Huggan has successfully engaged us to look at a different side of the story, to look at the excruciating mischief caused by the social and psychological confinements around us as we incessantly strive to integrate and achieve a sense of belonging.