

Elaine risley essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

How is our identity formed? Is it true that who we are is developed at a young age? Or do the changes that occur in our lifetime allow us to develop a sense of self? Do the relationships, hardships, emotions and changes we experience define our identity? As we grow into adults there will be numerous changes that occur. Some of these changes will cause obstacles in our life and make it hard for us to move on, Others will propel us forward. Whichever the case, everything that happens in our life will shape us as people, one way or another.

The memories that we carry with us, formed as a result of the experiences we have will contribute to the identity that we eventually form. Such is true for the main character in *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood. Elaine Risley, a 50 year old artist who is originally from Toronto has come back after many years for a retrospective on her work. Though the reason behind coming back to the city is for her career, she finds that the past does not leave her alone and her memories continue to arise. As Elaine shines light on her past we learn how much she has changed.

The Elaine that is portrayed in the present is not who she was years ago. The hardships and experiences faced by Elaine and the coming of age allow her to mold her identity into who she is today. In more ways than one I can see myself reflected in the ways that Elaine develop her identity. On the other hand many things are also different between us two. Like Elaine Risley, my experiences, hardships, and memories shape me into the person I am. The experiences and relationships that we have in our childhood years continue to impact our developing identity well into our adulthood.

The people of our childhood, the turning points in our lives, and how much our childhood memories impact our present will define our identity. As a child Elaine was a naive, innocent child who was babied by her family because she was the youngest. She spent a lot of time playing with her brother and overall, she was a happy child but everything that she was about, all her happiness, everything, changed once she moved to Toronto at the age of 8 and met Cordellia. Elaine talks about how Toronto changed everything for her, when she says, “ before we moved to Toronto i was happy” (Atwood, 22).

Cordellia, also the youngest in the family, found comfort in asserting her power upon the other girls. This, Elaine later understands, was because of the lack of power and love she was given at home. Elaine was some one that trusted people with ease and did not realize it when someone was trying to harm her. The person Elaine was, allowed her to believe that Cordellia was a true friend. The lack of self confidence and the sheer trust that Elaine has in others can be seen when she says, “ I am not normal, I am not like the other girls. Cordellia tells me so, but she will help me.

Grace and carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time (Atwood 134). Here Elaine is talking about what Cordellia thinks of her. Instead of understanding that there is nothing wrong with her, Elaine’s self confidence drops further and she allows herself to put her trust in her friends, to help change her into a better person. Due to the implications that Cordellia has made, Elaine starts to change herself. She starts to dress in the manner that Cordellia approves of, and stops spending time with her brother, because Cordellia says girls are meant to stay away from boys.

Elaine begins to belittle herself and does not share the things that she knows with others, instead she agrees to the myths that Cordellia tells because she does not want to lose her as a friend. To deal with the misery Cordellia bestows upon her, Elaine tries to remove herself from the emotional pain and confusion she feels as a result of the bullying, by inflicting physical pain upon herself. While she does this she thinks about everything that Cordellia has said to her. The thought process that Elaine has makes the reader think that she is trying to convince herself of something that she knows is not true.

Elaine talks about the worries that she has of losing Cordellia as a friend when she says “ I lie with my knees up... I’m peeling the skin off of my feet... I worry about what I’ve said today... How I walk what I wear, all of these things need improvement... cordellia Tells me so, but she will help me. ”

Elaine has put aside her determined self and now waits to be told what she is to do. Elaine does not do anything that Cordellia does not allow of her. Time passes and Elaine becomes more and more prone to Cordellia’s abuse.

Eventually Elaine stumbles upon a game, marbles.

Though a simple game, Elaine finds peace in playing marbles because it is a game that all genders can play. Elaine develops a fondness for one particular marble, a blue cat’s eye. The marble allows Elaine to grasp to the reality that is far out of her reach. The cat’s eye takes on the role of something similar to a promise ring, a promise that Elaine has made to herself, to keep the real Elaine alive somewhere inside her. It symbolizes the person that has been pushed under by the pressures of being a young girl. Life passes like this for a long time, and Elaine allows herself to be the victim.

Her childhood turns into a string of lies that she is telling herself, but once again everything changes once Elaine reaches the breaking point of her tolerance and comes to grips with the politics of childhood. The moment that changes Elaine's life occurs at the creek. On a walk home one day Cordellia believes that Elaine is laughing at her, so she decides to punish her. The route that they take home contains a bridge with a ravine under it that is believed to have dangerous men in it. Cordellia takes Elaine's hat and throws it into the ravine, " get it then you'll be forgiven" (Atwood 251).

Elaine believes the Virgin Mary rescues her. She is able to step away from this life changing moment and see beyond Cordellia. After this incident Elaine does not go back to Cordellia instead she builds a new friendship with a girl named Jill. She does everything in her power to avoid Cordellia and Cordellia becomes some what of a nuisance to her. After this incident Elaine finds it within herself to walk away from it all, she realizes that there was nothing wrong with her, " don't you dare walk away on us", cordiellia says behind me. " you get back here right now! I can hear this for what it is, its an imitation, its acting. Its an impersonation of someone much older. Its a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid my anger is as much at myself as at them (Atwood 259). Elaine is able to see the stupidity in following Cordellia, and tending to her every whim. She has finally reached the point where she will be able to turn her identity around. She is now on the road that will allow her to assert herself. Similar to Elaine my childhood has had a great impact on my identity.

Being the first children of three I was and also among the first in extended family I got a great amount of love from my family and was in a sense treated like a princess. When my sister was born the relationships that I had with my family remained intact, and throughout the family I became known as the little girl that enjoys mingling. As a child I also had a few friends that were really close to my heart, one of them being a cousin. Among these friends there was a girl that I had known since birth, but she was someone that was towards the bossy side.

My friend would come over to my house, color on my dolls, steal them, tell me what we were to play, and tell our group of friends how to act. As we grow we both had our first siblings and she use to make me feel bad about the fact that I had a sister and she had a brother. Once she moved away I became closer to my cousin. My cousin and I would spend hours playing in my backyard, until the day her parents got divorced. Having to watch my cousin deal with her drunk father, and her mother that was tired of putting up with tore me in half and I realized then that I would never marry a drinker.

The day that my cousin left with her mom and was no longer a part of my family was the day I lost one of my best friends. For a while I went to India with my grandparents and spent a year there, while I was their I became closer to my grandparents and because I was there for a long time at a young age I developed a motherly bond with my grandma, when I came back I had a hard time putting my mom in that position. Also when I came back I had a new neighbor! My new neighbor was a boy a year older then me. Having no one else to play with the two of us became the best of friends, and I adapted the methods of boys.

Instead of dolls I played with cars, instead of bears I wanted guns, and instead of dressing up like a princess I wanted to be Spiderman. These memories of my childhood carried into the future with and i find myself reflecting upon them often. Once Elaine enters high school the changes that she has made to her identity are noticeable, and the ways in which her childhood has shaped her can be pinpointed. The memories of her past are buried deep below and scarcely remembered. The moments that were a part of her childhood are described in differently by the people that are a part of her life.

In high school Elaine tries her best to put everything that happened in her childhood behind her, and start fresh. The way Elaine remembers her childhood makes the reader question what truly happened at the creek. The attempt that Elaine has made to forget everything that happened to her in her childhood can be interpreted when she says, “ nobody mentions anything about this missing time, except my mother. Once in a while she says, “ That bad time you had,” and I am puzzled. What is she talking about? I find these references to bad times vaguely threatening, vaguely insulting: I am not the sort of girl who has bad times, I have good times only. (Atwood 273). Elaine does not remember what happened to her, and the memory that she does have, she has manipulated it such that she believes her childhood was a pleasant one, she tries not to remember the unpleasant memories. With the power shift and anger moving as one, Elaine is able release all her anger towards Cordellia with verbal abuse. Elaine has now become the bully, and she uses her anger to get back at Cordellia. With the power that she has been given she is able to realize the worth of it, and how it makes you feel.

In a way she becomes the person that she hated and envied the most in her childhood, Cordellia. Like Cordellia, Elaine enjoys the power that she has, she makes it evident when she says, “strangely enough my mean behaviour does not result in fewer friends, but on the surface more. The girls are afraid of me, but they know where it is safest, beside me. Half a step behind me”. Here a prior moment in the book surfaces, the image that is formed is somehow identical to Elaine walking a step behind Cordellia who had the power, and had others fearing her on her side.

Elaine understands that she is now stronger than Cordellia, in a mental sense. The need that Elaine had for Cordellia many years ago is now no longer there, instead the tables have turned and now Cordellia needs Elaine. Elaine expresses that she is aware of this knowledge when she says, “Cordellia wants to point out Lump-lump Family cars, but I’m tired of this. I have denser, more malevolent little triumph to finger: energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (Atwood 313). Also because of the childhood that Elaine had she still finds it very hard to trust girls including Cordellia.

Even now everything that is happening Elaine feels is an act she explains this when she says, “she knows the rituals, she knows how we’re supposed to be behaving, now that we’re in high school. But I think these things are impenetrable and fraudulent, and I can’t do them without feeling I’m acting.” (Atwood 234). Elaine is having a hard time fitting in because she has matured faster than the others, whereas Cordellia fits in quite well. Because of the relations Elaine had with girls in her childhood, she finds it easier to get along with boys rather than the girls, resulting in better relationships.

Elaine finds it easy to carry a relationship with her boyfriends, whereas Cordellia struggles to find common grounds and often ends up making the boys uncomfortable. Throughout her high school years the changes that Elaine has made to her identity can be seen as foreshadowing's from her childhood. Elaine has learned to live for herself, she is more cautious with who she invests her trust in, she understands how the world around her works and she is able to move forward with her life without getting stomped on by the people she believes are her well wishers.

In everything she does that allows us to decipher her identity, glimpses of her childhood can be seen. Like Elaine the echo of my childhood could be heard as I grew into a teenager. As I grew I carried some of my boyish traits with me, often I would find people telling my mom that I dress like a boy, but I was not bothered because it was what I was comfortable in. At school I would always be found on the field digging a hole in the sand, playing tackle football, tag or grounders, whereas the other girls were skipping rope or worried about the fact that boys have koodies.

For a while I continued my life in this manner but when grade 6 approached everything changed. As everyone got older people started to split up into groups, everyone was friends with their own race, the smart people hung out with the smart people and the jock's with the jock's. Where everyone was finding their place I did not find a place where I fit, nobody wanted me. I would spend my time inside the school, if I went out I would end up getting in trouble and get sent to the contact room, I would pick fights that were not mine, but still I made no friends. Then a new girl moved to the school.

The new girl was not the same as me but she dressed in the same manner. We became fast friends and got known as bullies. Though people talked to us nobody liked to spend a lot of time with us, but we were invited to play football with the boys. As our friendship got deeper and our circle grew bigger the fact that people still treated me the same behind my back started to bother me. Then something else happened that changed everything. My school changed once again and the two schools in the area got combined to back a new school, that was where I ran into my childhood friend again.

My old friend was the kind of girl that everyone wanted to be friends with, but she wanted to be friends with me. I took this as an opportunity to change my identity. With my old friend by my side I started to change myself, but even with this I went to far. With the clothes that I use to wear before I was able to hide my body and I never paid attention to my figure, but upon changing my attire I thought I needed to loose weight so I started to exercise a lot and lost a lot of weight. Going into high school I started to try new things and got into the wrong activities.

I continued upon this route and did not stop, and because of this my marks began to drop. Up until the last days of grade 12 I continued upon my journey with my friends by my side. I was liked by many, but I did not like myself. Worries about not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, the affects of the things I did and a low self esteem, caused me to adapt odd ways of inflicting pain upon myself. The self esteem issues were brought upon me by my own mother. My mother believed that I was getting fat, which I was, but this time I did not throw myself into exercise and stop eating, instead I began to over eat and put on a lot of weight.

I began to eat handfuls of Tylenol and Advil, I would cut myself in unnoticeable places and watch the blood flow. Everything went on the same and I graduated with the rest of my grade 12 class but my marks were not good enough to get me into a post secondary institute, but still I did not see the hole I was digging for myself. I continued with everything that I was doing until my friends went off to university and I was left behind, the only one left standing beside me was the one that was telling me to stop throughout.

Only then did I realize what I was sacrificing. Only then did I decide that I need to turn it around. I began to take summer school, night school and continuing education courses to try and make up for the mistakes that I made. I cut down my friends circle to only those that truly cared. Though I have things figured out and I have a plan in mind nothing is written in stone. I wish to carry on the journey I have decided to develop my identity and hope to make the right choices along the way. An identity is not something that can be bought, or sold.

An identity describes who we are and how people perceive us. It is important to understand when to let go something and what to hold onto. Once in a while it is important to put yourself before others and try to see where the decision you make or the ones that are being made for you will bring you. The character in Margaret Atwood's book *Cat's Eye* went through many hardships to develop her identity, but in the end she shaped herself into the person she desired to be. Similarly for me the growth of my identity will continue as I age and until I have reached a desired end.