

ENGLISH – LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE ESSAY

Kennedy's stories focus on ordinary people whose lives become "Like a House on Fire" when events outside their control overwhelm them. To what extent do you agree?

In Cate Kennedy's collection of short stories Like A House on Fire, the everyday lives of humans are showcased to demonstrate their incapability to avoid unfortunate events and its consequences. Set against the backdrop of contemporary Australia, where life is in the constant state of flux, Kennedy reveals the inability for individuals to overcome the unexpected physical and emotional challenges. However, for some characters, they can conquer the destructiveness of physical injuries and emotional insecurities and continue their life with a sense of hope. Thus, Kennedy highlights that the experience of hardship provides individuals with the ability to live with their affliction and generates an optimistic mindset towards adversities.

Stemming from the occurrence of physical pain and illnesses, relationships between individuals are associated with fragility and powerlessness. In *Little Plastic Shipwreck*, the life of Roley and Liz is changed in an instant when she suffered a head injury and there is a profound emptiness in their lives, which is also a feature of the Oceanworld aquarium. Roley describes the dolphin as "the only creature at the aquarium...able to create a facial expression...", a creature he describes as "loving", "sensitive" and "full of understanding and such forgiveness". Symbolically, the death of Samson represents the removal of love and connections in his own relationship with Liz after the incident and the other animals' lack of humanity is also echoed in the dreadful relationship between Roley and Liz. In a similar vein, the back injury of the husband illustrates that he feels "like a beaten dog" as he is unable to overcome the difficulties and is all too aware of the strain his injury is putting on the family. Through the events of Christmas decoration, the shattered ceramic nativity scene becomes Kennedy's metaphor of the impact of injuries. When he carries the box "like it's a cardboard coffin" and believes that he had "kill[ed] the occasion" and "poisoned it", he shows the extremes of damage he feels he is doing to the family and of his suffering. The suffering of loved ones is evident in both stories, however, there is sense of futility in the ending of *Little plastic shipwreck* in the imagery of the goldfish illustrating Roley gasping for oxygen as his mind "circled the stunned minute of what had happened" and he is forced "to learn it again, piece by piece." Kennedy highlights that instant unfortunate events can establish a permanent impact in everyday life, and thus enhances the possibility that individuals believe that they are incapable of regulating their life.

Amidst the emotional suffering of individuals, Kennedy demonstrates the lack of support networks and inability to share their grief with close ones, resulting in emotional isolation. In "cross country", Rebecca decides after her break up that she will "wrap herself in the spare room quilt" and isolate herself to immerse herself in pursuit of online stalking of her partner. The failed relationship of Rebecca demonstrates her desire to continue to associate herself with her ex-boyfriend by using the internet as a refuge. All the links that have held her life together are suddenly "sundered", "peeled" and "flayed" and she is devastated and unable to disconnect herself from her grief from being abandoned by her partner. However, Anna is experiencing hardships from her dysfunctional family, where there is no sign of love and caring and her strong desire of changing the atmosphere of her family is evident through the comparison of whirlpool and the household. The narrator enjoys experiencing the whirlpool and the feeling of "letting yourself be loose and helpless" because the sisters utilise their physical environment powerfully, in a way that they are unable to emotionally as children in a household rife with conflict and a "lack of connection". Through the contrast between sky and light with the "dim and airless" lounge room, Kennedy illustrates the influence of having a disconnected family and the emotional impacts and suffering due to an inability to

understand love and compassion. The clean break between Rebecca and her partner reinforces the idea of emotional misery and that it can impact on the quality of ordinary life. Emphasis is placed on Rebecca's messy hair, dirty clothes, absence from work and the bluntness of the doctor, "You are depressed", that demonstrates her loneliness and the difficulty of her accepting the failure of this relationship, which allows Kennedy to encourage the readers to understand emotional suffering can become a burden for individuals as they are unable to overcome the consequences and challenges.

Although emotional and physical difficulties are irrepressible and can generate additional hardship in the lives of individuals, some characters are able to develop an ability to defeat hardships and continue their life with a sense of optimism. Michelle grows in independence as she comes to the realisation that Des cannot be depended upon to care for her or their son. The metaphor of the door opening "first one thing ... and the click when it happens, like a door opening," reinforces her realisation that her relationship with Des is over and she now is "way beyond him" and she thereby begins to find new strength in herself, recognising that "she's got everything this baby needs..." This ability to demonstrate compassion to others is mirrored in "Ashes" with Chris's gentle touch of care for his mother. By questioning himself, "why hadn't he answered with enthusiastic assent?... just for the small mean pleasure of feeling his father turn away, defeated?...", Chris begins to understand the actions of his parents and realise that he was at fault for the ignorance within the family, From this, he is motivated to alter his attitude towards his mother. In "five dollar family", Michelle eventually find joy and self-fulfilment in her experience of childbirth and breastfeeding when she "succumb" to the needs of their child by having her "whole body [bending] to "Jason. The final line of Ashes, "...without interrupting her, he brushes it off," reveals the change in Chris of showing consideration and becoming more attuned to his mother's emotions, which allows the readers to realise that emotional barriers can be eliminated with a sense of self realisation and having the mindset that there is possibilities that hardships can be overcome.

The diverse approach towards hardships and challenges is demonstrated in Like A House on Fire where some individuals are unable to overcome the impacts of unfortunate events, yet other characters is determinate to accept the reality and view challenges with optimism. Kennedy illustrates the importance of having an alternative mindset that provides individuals to control events that are overwhelming. Thus, individuals are allowed to realise their potential of overcoming difficulties and regain a sense of hope in life.