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Sane or Insane, That is the Question

"I had a headache," Susana casually explained to her psychiatrist as the reason why she consumed a handful of aspirins and followed it with a bottle of vodka. While everyone was preparing for college after graduation, Susana Kaysen was sent to Claymoore Mental Institution as a result of an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The film, *Girl, Interrupted* is set in Belmont, Massachusetts during the late 1960s, and gives a moving account of the struggles that eighteen year old Susana Kayson encounters as she deals with the inner complexities of anxiety and depression. The film provides a credible story of Susana's evolutionary journey at the mental hospital as she grapples with how to fit into a society that she does not understand. Based on Susanna Kaysen's autobiography of the same name, the biopic drama released in 1999 was directed by James Mangold and written by Lisa Loomer. *Girl, Interrupted* presents an impactful narrative with an authentic portrayal of characters and dialogue. The film effectively resonates with individuals who have mental health issues as well as educates people who have not experienced similar issues.

The film skillfully uses episodic flashbacks to provide the emotional backstory from the point of view of Susana Kayson, who is brilliantly played by Winona Ryder. *Girl, Interrupted* begins with Nurse Valerie, played by Whoopi Goldberg giving Susana a tour of the psychiatric ward as she introduces her to the fellow patients that Susana will interact with. It is the two

young girls, Georgina, played by Clea Duvall, a self-described pathological liar, and a sweet disfigured burn victim named Polly, played by Elizabeth Moss, who first become friends with Susana. The rest of the cast of engaging characters, include Janet, who is an anorexic who is suffering to achieve her perfect weight played by Angela Bettis, Daisy is played by Brittany Murphy, who is a sexually abused bulimic, and Lisa, who is a charming sociopath played by Angelina Jolie, which earned her an Academy Award for Best Actress.

The realistic portrayal of the lives of institutionalized young women coping with self-discovery and forming friendships as they find mutual understanding among one another makes *Girl, Interrupted* a captivating movie. The film effectively shows the frustration and confusion that arises from Susana attempting to comprehend her disorder at a time when society was lacking adequate knowledge about psychiatric disorders. After noticing a naked impatient running outside the office window during Susana's first session with her psychiatrist, Dr. Melbourne (played by Jeffrey Tambor), Susana angrily rants, "How am I suppose to get better when everyone is fucking crazy here!" Susanna's unease about how she feels about her memories and current thoughts continue to leave her unsure if she was sane or crazy, which engrosses the audience in her journey to heal.

The film gives a sincere look at the intense struggles the girls faced being in a society that quickly judged people who did not conform to the set standard. The theme of the film explores the stigmas associated with mental illness and what people who have had their sanity called into question must contend with. The film, for instance, gives a realistic look at the girls' emotional reactions after breaking into the main doctors office to read their files. As they start reading their individual evaluations, their girls accurately convey their disappointment and confusion over their diagnoses. *Girl, Interrupted* creates a dialog throughout the movie that evokes the viewers

to understand the emotions of the characters in a manner that anybody who has ever questioned their place in the world can relate.

While the film creates genuine compassion for the characters, the film incorporates some overuse of cliché references about mental patients that lack anything unique to the dialogue. For example, a field trip into town for ice cream, Susana states, "They are taking us for ice cream in the middle of a blizzard which makes you wonder who the real whack jobs are.". Later on in the scene as the wife of Susana's old lover angrily confronts her at the ice cream shop, provoking Lisa to warn her not to point her finger at "crazy people" as the other girls proceed to bark and shout acting unstable, does not add to the film.

The characters in *Girl, Interrupted* are engaging, and watching them evolve and form relationships makes it a relatable film. The film's depiction of women struggling with mental illness in the face of societal discrimination and the unpredictable times of the late 1960s all work together to produce a compelling story with a variety of well portrayed engaging characters. Despite a few stereotypical dialogues, the film adequately chronicles the difficulties of understanding mental illness and how it affects each person uniquely. All of the girls in the film were adolescents dealing with their already challenging times for women with the added struggles of mental illness.