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Misrepresentation of Mental Disorders in Media and Literature

In the entertainment business and literature alike, there is a fascination with abnormal psychology. There are countless stories depicting mentally-ill characters and their lives. One might wonder where this interest comes from. Curiosity is a major reason for society's fixation on abnormal minds. They want to understand this phenomenon and make some sense of it. Portraying characters who show signs of mental illnesses has been quite popular for decades. These types of films and TV-shows have a massive audience, making the business quite lucrative. This could be why the genre continues to thrive. Most people nowadays seek information from the mass media, especially in the age of technology. What people watch and read is bound to affect the way they view mental health.

Sometimes, the line between facts and entertainment is blurred. The media is more interested in making their content entertaining or interesting instead of accurate. Typically, we see the same few portrayals that are overused but are somehow still popular. Most of the time, mentally ill people are shown to be incapable to function properly in society to some capacity. Representation plays a large role in how people view outsiders. Inaccurate representations of mental disorders could lead to harmful beliefs being held about innocent people. There are plenty of cases where this marginalized community was represented poorly. How have misrepresentations of mental illness in literature and popular media affected how society views the subject? To find

that answer, I will explore some of these misleading portrayals and analyze information from health and psychology experts.

An impactful piece of literature that portrays mental illness is “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins. This is a short story about a woman, who is keeping a journal. In this journal, she talks about her day-to-day life. She and her husband were renting out a place to stay for the summer. The woman goes on to explain that she feels ill, but her husband and her brother disagree. They are both physicians and claim that she is suffering from a “nervous depression,” and that her behavior is a slight hysterical tendency. Mainly, she has an unhealthy fixation on the wallpaper in her bedroom. She evolves from describing it as irritating to being fond of it and eventually finding it unbearable. Her husband disregards her feelings and is very controlling. He laughs at her, and she believes it to be something normal. He forbids her to write or interact with people. He belittles her and she does not show her true emotions to him. As a result of this dismissiveness, her condition worsens. At one point she becomes delusional and suspects that both her husband and his sister are fascinated with the wallpaper just like she is.

This story is not a negative/misleading representation of mental health. In fact, it shows us how sexist biases in medicine used to be harmful. That is not to say these issues do not exist today, but it was very prominent years ago. This maltreatment led the narrator to believe that her struggles were insignificant, and she was made to feel like an inconvenience. The text states, “I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!” (Perkins 649). This shows how the ill woman was made to feel like a burden for simply sharing her feelings with her own husband. In addition, the text also states, “I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.” (Perkins 652). Here, she demonstrates discouragement and neglects to address her issues. She feels like she must ignore what is going on

in her head because it is silly to dwell on it. This piece of literature helps the audience sympathize with those struggling. Its portrayal of mental health makes the reader understand the silent struggle and it educates the audience about how misconceptions and stigma can harm the mentally ill. The narrator's issues were not taken seriously which caused her to become increasingly irritated and delusional. This teaches people to not overlook those who show that they are suffering.

Another prominent work of literature depicting mental disorders in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" by J.D. Salinger. The short story starts with a woman named Muriel who is alone in her hotel room. She receives a call from her mother, and it is revealed she is on vacation with her husband Seymour, who had just returned from war. Her mother expresses great concern for her daughter because Seymour had been acting unusually reckless since his return. Muriel keeps trying to reassure her mother and tells her that everything is fine. There is something clearly wrong with her husband, who is showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. She does not pay attention to these abnormalities, and his changed behavior drives a wedge between them. Later on, Seymour is shown to be at the beach, away from his wife, further showing that there is some sort of disconnect between the two. The story eventually ends with Seymour returning to the hotel room where his wife was, and committing suicide.

This story takes place in a time period where PTSD and other mental health issues related to warfare were not completely understood or accepted. Muriel seems to be unphased by her husband's sudden and erratic behavioral changes. She dismisses her mother's concerns about Seymour's behavior as everyone else did those days. Seymour likely felt misunderstood and dismissed. This story helps readers see the devastating effects of leaving mental health unaddressed. Although it had quite a dramatic ending, it was effective in getting the point across. It teaches people that failing to recognize the problem at hand can play a role in facilitating the

effects of someone's illness. Being dismissive of mental health can lead to a devastating situation. This work dramatizes mental health concerns, but given the message people can take from the events, it positively impacts society's knowledge and thoughts on mental health. It helps people become better equipped at approaching these situations. The lack of knowledge about certain disorders is dangerous so it is important to have the general population informed on these matters.

In modern media, mentally ill people are largely misrepresented and are commonly shown to be violent. Data shows that out of all programs portraying characters with mental illness, "One in four mentally ill characters kill someone, and half are portrayed as hurting others, making the mentally ill the group most likely to be involved in violence. The offense rate of mentally ill characters with speaking parts is 10-fold that of other television characters" (Stuart 2012). This shows how an overwhelming amount of mentally ill characters on television are depicted as being inclined to violence, which is far from the truth. Television portrayals give people the impression that mentally ill individuals can not improve and become productive members of society (Stuart 2012). The media portrays them as people who are closed-off from society, with no identity besides their disorder. Furthermore, the media makes treatment seem scary by dramatizing electroshock therapy and exaggerating the side effects of prescribed drugs. In movies, the same narrative and sentiments towards mental health are prominent. These types of films and television shows rake in millions of viewers, which only encourages the creation of similar content. Overall, we see the media's portrayal of mental illness is inaccurate and far-off from reality.

Not all representations of mental health are inherently negative. In the widely popular series "Thirteen Reasons Why," mental illness is romanticized. When something is romanticized, it is depicted as ideal or in an unrealistic matter. The drama takes place after the suicide of a girl named Hannah Baker. Prior to her death, Hannah recorded 13 tapes and left them behind. The

tapes included the reasons she ended her life and who is responsible. The show addresses real problems teens face, however, it was met with harsh criticism because it appeared to promote suicide as an option to teens who are struggling. In the show, Hannah Baker famously states “I’m about to tell you the story of my life, more specifically why my life ended, And if you’re listening to this tape, you’re one of the reasons why” (Netflix, S1E1) This line is important because it makes suicide seem like an act of vengeance. It can give off the impression that committing suicide will make people care about you. The series has a young and vulnerable audience and these ideas can be too dangerous to be implanted in their minds.

Unlike other portrayals, this show does not portray mentally ill people negatively. However, it downplays people’s struggles because it could make people believe that suicide is an attention-seeking act. It can make people who are suicidal feel misunderstood, causing them to be silent about their struggles. The whole situation is dramatized to be entertaining to the audience. The show does not provide proper education and resources about the topic, which results in misinformation about mental health.

The movie “Split” written, directed, and produced by M. Night Shyamalan is a horror film about a man suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID. In the film, he is depicted as a violent person who kidnaps and holds three teenage girls captive underground. His different personalities were on display in the film. He is undergoing therapy and it is revealed that he has 23 personalities. His personality “Dennis” is responsible for kidnapping the girls attending a birthday party. This movie was subject to a lot of criticism due to its depiction of the mentally ill. The public is not informed on the reality of DID, which can create the false idea that those who have DID are predisposed to violence or have malicious personalities.

Amelia Joubert, a woman with DID who runs a support group advocating for those with the disorder, finds the film to be misleading and possibly dangerous to the public's perception of DID. In an interview with CNN, she brings up the lack of knowledge of DID among medical workers. She states, "I was tired of hearing this and feeling like I had to be ashamed of something ... that helped me survive trauma as a child," (Nedelman 1). Here, Joubert explains how medical professionals do not seem to receive the proper training for treating individuals with DID, and as a result, there is a discrepancy between the knowledge of doctors and the needs of patients. The text also states, "Joubert, who has been hospitalized in residential and acute care facilities, said she often felt that her doctors did not understand or even believe in her disorder" (Nedelman 1). This shows the impact the lack of awareness about DID has on patients who are seeking help. Popular movies like "Split" can create negative attitudes and false preconceptions about people with DID. Joubert believes the production of the film could have at least agreed to release a statement about DID. Her testimony as an advocate for the DID community gives the public insight into what they have to deal with and exposes the negligence of the filmmakers. The DID community was unsuccessful in trying to get the production's support, however, this interview helped spread awareness and bring some public support for the cause.

How mental health is portrayed in popular media contributes to the attitudes people have about mental health and people with mental illnesses. As it turns out, these negative portrayals of mental disorders are harmful to how people with these issues live and are treated. Stigmatizing mental illness is devastating in numerous ways, "People who experience mental illness face discrimination and prejudice when renting homes, applying for jobs, and accessing mental health services" (Overton & Molina 2008). Inaccurate beliefs surrounding the mentally ill have a large impact on their lives. The problems go beyond just simple misunderstandings. Out of 1000 people

surveyed, almost a third would not support a political candidate who had been treated for a mental illness (Dunn 2017). This shows that a lot of people associate mental illnesses with incompetency. Even though the hypothetical candidate went through treatment, people still believe they are unfit for the job. Moreover, the stigma created about mental health includes the false belief that depression is associated with laziness and substance abuse. This makes people who are affected ashamed of their condition. These prejudices make their way into employment opportunities. Employers are less likely to hire someone if they are labeled mentally ill. This is because “Employers often assume that people with a mental illness may be more likely to be absent, dangerous, or unpredictable,” (Overton & Molina 2008). When seeking treatment, there are various challenges for these individuals. Lack of employment can pose a financial barrier when trying to get treatment. Even when treatment is accessible, mental health professionals are not exempt from having prejudgements about certain people. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” you can see how sexism or any other type of negative beliefs held by doctors could affect those suffering. When that story took place, women were seen as overly dramatic and “hysterical” if they showed signs of mental conditions. Women were unable to be treated properly for their mental issues.

Self-efficacy is the belief and confidence one has within themselves that they are capable of succeeding. When people with a mental illness do not have a support system and feel dehumanized, they have a lower level of self-efficacy (Overton & Molina 2008). When media and film portray people like them as menaces, they feel helpless and imprisoned within the identity given to them. These negative attitudes toward mental disorders can lower the self-esteem of those trying to overcome their illness.

The story does not end here. Things have been getting much better over the years for mentally ill people. There are numerous people and organizations that are advocating to end the

stigma. Influential figures such as politicians and celebrities are speaking out to end the negative beliefs held by the public. Therapy and treatment are starting to become more available and useful than ever before. We are making progress, and the future looks promising. Things might not be perfect right now, but compared to decades ago, society has come so far and that is something to celebrate.

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