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ENG170-24

21 February 2022

*Girl Interrupted*

Imagine someone judging you for something you have no control over. That is what someone with a disability experiences daily. With invisible disabilities, people often make snarky comments about mental health telling the person to just “think happy thoughts.” People experience these roadblocks and face disrespect from those who do not understand their disability, and do not even care to try. The movie, *Girl Interrupted*, tells the story of Susanna Kaysen with borderline personality disorder and her experience at a psychiatric institution. The movie highlights her struggle with coming to terms with her disability while navigating an unfamiliar environment with new people. To really make a change in how people view disabilities in the media today, people need to become more educated and interested in disabilities. There must be more effort to understand the challenges that come with having a disability. This will enlighten others in how we can further aid those who have disabilities. The movie, *Girl Interrupted*, creates a negative portrayal of disabilities by overexaggerating the disabilities present and uses stereotypical ideas of mental illnesses.

Mental health is extremely misunderstood in society today and the media in general, along with other invisible disabilities. In Susannah B. Mintz’s essay “Invisibility” from *Keywords and Disabilities* she further explains invisible disabilities. Mintz says, “invisibility also refers to diseases, conditions, and sensations that cannot be observed externally such as

chronic pain, cognitive or psychiatric impairment, or deafness. So-called invisible disabilities present unique challenges in a society” (113). Here Mintz is discussing disabilities that you cannot physically see. There is so much stigma surrounding people with disabilities, and these invisible disabilities add to that much more stigma. These can include mocking, criticizing, stereotypes, and gaslighting. These disabilities are difficult for those without them to understand, and because you cannot see invisible disabilities it is hard for society to grasp there is a disability.

In the movie, *Girl Interrupted*, the main character's name is Susanna, and she tries to take her life with pills and liquor but is in denial about it when she first enters treatment. Susanna's diagnosis can make it extremely difficult for the patient to regulate emotions, maintain stable relationships, and control their behaviors. As it is Susanna's first time being in a psychiatric institution, along the way she meets friends such as Lisa, who is a sociopath. Lisa's character is where the negative portrayal stems from because they make her seem crazy. Although there may be some accuracy to her character, the movie exaggerates it, making it seem unrealistic to a certain extent. The movie's portrayal of disabilities in, *Girl Interrupted* is all over the place, and Susanna Kaysen is almost irrelevant in the sense that they do not go in depth into what BPD is. As for her being the main character, the producers should have done a more in-depth job explaining her diagnosis and background story. The movie, *Girl Interrupted*, portrays invisible disabilities negatively using stereotypical portrayals of what people believe a sociopath. The producers do this with one of the other main characters, Lisa.

The film portrays one of Susanna's friends from the institute in a negative way from the beginning of the film through overexaggerating her diagnosis. Lisa has been in and out of the institute for eight years. Her disorder, also known as antisocial personality disorder, can be

characterized as individuals not respecting the feelings, rights, and emotions of others. This can include constantly lying, manipulating others for personal gain, impulsiveness, and risk taking among others. Lisa had a strong psychological pull on everyone in the institute, including Susanna. Lisa appears charming, but as the movie continues to progress her charm turns to abuse. The film shows Lisa slapping one of the other patients, making unnecessary scenes to cause amusement for herself, and yelling at doctors and nurses. Lisa even ran away and convinced Susanna to come with her when Susanna was clearly upset about her recent diagnosis with BPD.

When the two did escape they went to a recently released patient Daisy, who suffered with compulsive eating disorder, and this leads up to a gruesome scene in the movie. Lisa is shown mocking and taunting Daisy and accusing her of liking the sexual abuse she has received from her father. The next day Susanna goes upstairs to check on Daisy only to find that she hung herself in her bathroom on her birthday. This shows that Daisy decided to leave the world the day she came into it and how she felt like the only way out was to commit suicide. Susanna talks about wanting to die in the movie and that “I know what it is like to want to die. How it hurts to smile. How you try to fit in, but you cannot. How you hurt yourself on the outside to try to kill the thing on the inside.” This shows that Susanna knows what it feels like to be that sick and feels like there is nothing left to do but hurt herself. (*Girl Interrupted* 01:36:67) Susanna immediately starts crying and getting freaked out after seeing Daisy, while Lisa comes upstairs and starts laughing saying something about how Daisy was always going to kill herself, but she needed as excuse to go through with it. Lisa then steals all the money from Daisy’s robe while she is dead and slips it into Susanna’s jacket (*Girl Interrupted*).

This creates an increasingly negative portrayal of disabilities in that Lisa had no remorse for what she helped cause. This is slightly true that people who are sociopaths cannot feel remorse for what they have done and cannot imagine how others might be feeling. While this can be true, sociopaths are not necessarily evil, and can be productive members of society. This further shows that the producers focused solely on portraying Lisa to be the villain, and in a negative way. The producers use stereotypes throughout the movie, *Girl Interrupted*, to further add to the plot and make the audience more interested. Even though it created a negative portrayal of disabilities the producers did not care if their movie did well.

Inaccurate mental health treatment without a specialized treatment plan can lead to worsening symptoms, as it does in *Girl Interrupted*. It was not until after she saw Daisy dead that she began to take her treatment seriously. Rather than running away with Lisa, Susanna returns to treatment and begins to work towards her recovery. This shows that even if it might seem like the only way to feel better and to take away the pain is by dying, when it is not getting rid of the pain; you are merely transferring it to someone else. Susanna had an epiphany on her own that she really does want to get better and does need the help. Before all this Susanna felt like she did not belong in the psychiatric institute and that she did not try to kill herself, but after the Daisy incident her mindset completely changed. She now knew what she wanted, and that she wanted to get better. The film shows this as Susanna looks like she is doing better, she is going to therapy, and talking to people with a smile on her face. Susanna finally does get released from the institute and that is the end of the movie. The producers did not go in depth about the struggles that Susanna will face for the rest of her life, and how this disability will affect her every single day. They merely wanted the movie to be exceptional, no matter how accurately disabilities were portrayed in it.

The movie, *Girl Interrupted*, creates a negative portrayal of disabilities. The producers focused on how to make their movie better, not on how to represent the disabilities better. The film portrays Lisa in a negative way from the very beginning of the film. They paint her out to be the villain, and exaggerate her behaviors and actions, making her seem worse than she is. Disabilities are present in this film but add to the stigma surrounding not only mental health, but disabilities as well. To make a change in how people view disabilities in the media today, people need to become more educated and interested in disabilities, and seriously try to understand the challenges that come with them. This is how we can break the stigma finally, and aid others through the struggles they face due to their disabilities.

Work Cited

Adams, Rachel, et al. "Invisibility". *Keywords for Disability Studies*. New York University Press, 2015. Page 113.

*Girl, Interrupted*. Directed by Mangold, James. Columbia Pictures, 1999.