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### **Dangerous Tropes and Stereotypes in Films**

In today's society, tropes and stereotypes are constantly presented in the media to tell a story about a certain group of people or a particular area, hobby, or study. These tropes contain countless myths about society in an effort to create a high entertainment value for the audience. The form of media that tends to do this the most is that of film and the characters and storylines that the movies and television shows create to keep the viewers watching. The issue with these stereotypes is that they can be extremely harmful to the actual people, things, and places that they are portraying. Stereotypes give a negative and false representation of the world around them and cause people to think about things the way that they are seen in media instead of how they actually are in our everyday society. However, these tropes do not have to continue to keep existing, and with a little bit of effort and understanding, society and the media can do away with these ideas and create a better world for all to be a part of without judgment.

One of the tropes that are constantly present in today's society is focused on the topic of gender, more specifically, that of transgender individuals and the way that they are portrayed on screen. To start, when many people think of gender stereotypes of people in a film, they tend to only think in terms of the two genders, cis males and cis females, and how the two interact with each other in the film, completely overlooking other genders present such as trans females, trans males, non-binary people and much more. This idea can already be detrimental to the community

as the lack of representation gives members of the community a hard time relating to characters on screen as they rarely see themselves portrayed and feel like an outlier in society. When they do see themselves on screen, the characters are mainly portrayed by cisgender actors who are not even a part of the community themselves. However, what is even worse comes in the small portrayal of those individuals on screen.

Films tend to show transgender individuals in a comic or negative light in the majority of all films that they are in. Many of these tropes include the cross-dresser, the token trans character, the shocking reveal, the prostitute, and the most detrimental, the trans villain. In order to focus on a change in the representation of transgender individuals in the media, it is important to focus mainly on the latter trope. Even though it is well known that all of these myths can put trans people in harm's way, the trans villain is the most common and hurtful stereotype in the community.

To be able to truly learn how to fix these tropes, one must first note how long the tropes have been going on and where they originated from. The first notable film with a transgender villain is the 1960 film by Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*. This film follows Norman Bates as he runs a motel where he kidnaps girls to kill them to please his mother, as she can be the only woman in his life. The audience finds out later that Bates' mother has been dead for a while, and he is dressing up as her to commit these crimes due to his mental illness (*Psycho* 1960). Since Bates is dressing up as a woman, whether it is his mother or not, one can assume that he is portraying a trans woman by the standards of 1960 culture in the media (*Psycho* 1960). This concept can be detrimental because it puts into society's minds that trans women must be mentally ill and could turn into psychotic killers at any moment, putting women and children in harm's way while they go on their own personal murderous rampage while also putting into people's head that trans

women are not women but instead just men in wigs performing shady and scandalous behaviors. Fortunately, this is not the case and being transgender does not mean that someone is any more susceptible to these crimes, with many trans individuals just trying to live their lives as their true selves.

According to an article by Nikki Reitz entitled “The Representation of Trans Women in Film and Television,” out of 102 episodes of television with transgender characters, “21% of them featured a trans woman as a villain” (Reitz, Trans Women in Film). This thought process is a serious problem considering that it was stated later in the article that “In the United States, only 0.3% of adults identify as transgender” (Reitz, Trans Women in Film). The margin of people who actually identify as transgender to those trans individuals portrayed as villains is vast and acts as unneeded prejudice to an already small and underrepresented minority of people.

The truth of the matter is that these stereotypes can be easily avoided in order to create a safe environment for these individuals to live in. Thankfully, there has been a lot of progress towards creating a safe space for these individuals to live in during recent years, but nowhere near the amount of progress needed to create equality for all of them. One easy way that society and filmmakers can contribute to this change is to create films that show transgender individuals in a positive light, the way that they truly are in society, as hard workers, family members, friends, and respectable, talented individuals with their own positive aspirations and dreams. Trans people need to be treated as humans in these films rather than as criminals or people to “stay away from.” As soon as trans people are integrated into the media as more than just their gender or “different from the others,” more acceptance will be created for the community around them, and the stereotypes will finally start to fade.

Another detrimental stereotype in a film is the stereotype revolving around the issue of disability. Members of the disabled community are often not thought of in society in general, with many people thinking of them as burdens to the way the world works or someone who needs to be “fixed” in order to fit in with everyone else around them. This is especially true for those with disabilities that occur from accidents such as brain injuries, paralyzation, or amputations. Most films barely show characters in films with these disabilities, and when they do, the characters are either the side characters who are considered nothing but their disability or the main characters whose entire plot revolves around people being sad for them and the pity that they receive for their disability.

One film that is well known for perpetuating this trope is the 2016 film entitled, *Me Before You*. The film follows a young female named Lou, who is struggling to make ends meet and takes up a job as a caregiver to a man named Will, who was paralyzed from a motorcycle accident years earlier. Will is always angry and cynical due to his disability, but nevertheless the two fall in love. However, the film ends with Will having assisted suicide as he can no longer live happily with his disability (*Me Before You* 2016). This film is heartbreaking as many people watching can only hope that his love for Lou will stop him from being so cynical and depressed about his disability and that he will eventually find happiness and work through the struggles that he is facing. Once the ending comes around, it is shown that he believes it to not be possible, thus an unhappy ending and a seriously negative portrayal of those who are living with similar disabilities (*Me Before You* 2016). The film tells disabled people that their disability has destroyed their lives and their chance at happiness, and now they must live in agony until the day they die, which does not have to be the truth.

In an article written by Lauren Appelbaum titled “Disability Portrayal on Screen Hits a Landmark High, Yet Reinforces Negative Stereotypes,” she states, “characters with disabilities are more likely to be rescued in family films than other characters (34.3% compared with 20.6%)” while also adding that “in 2018, 33.3% of characters with a disability died in comparison to 12.8% of other characters” (Appelbaum, Disability Portrayal on Screen). These statistics show the negative energy that is put on the disabled community in film and tell many disabled people that they should fit into two boxes, either be rescued or die trying.

The saddest thing about this particular trope is that it takes the hope out of many disabled people's lives, leaving them to think that they are no longer good enough for society or no longer serve a purpose other than to be a burden on the people around them. This can cause a great increase in real-life suicide and depression among those individuals, as well as a harsh stigma revolving around the community itself. However, there is a way to fix the way the disabled community is portrayed on the screen to give more positive representation to those who are a part of it. First, one must take into consideration that no one has chosen to be disabled on their own; disability is usually an unexpected accidental or genetic circumstance that inflicts an individual with a certain impairment that may make them seem different from their other able-bodied peers. This, in turn, does not mean that disabled people are incapable of living to their fullest potential and leading fulfilled, happy, and successful lives.

Films need to take disabled people into consideration while they are creating films involving disability and do their best to create an accurate representation of a completely normal lifestyle that a disabled person may be living. This can be done by filmmakers hiring actually disabled people into certain character roles and doing their research before writing a story that can be portrayed as completely inaccurate to the disabled community in which they are featuring.

Most importantly, people need to create films with disabled people living happy endings that do not succumb to the tropes of disability causing them to be bitter or useless, as well as not letting the characters be defined by only their disabilities but instead showing a way in which they can thrive and be themselves as human beings rather than becoming nothing more than a form of inspiration porn for those who are unlike them.

One final trope that can be considered damaging to those affected by it would be the image of sexuality and how notably the LGBTQ+ community is represented in regard to their sexual orientation. Sexuality stereotypes, in particular, have been going on for generations, and regrettably, members of the community are still fighting the same issues of fabricated myths that they have been seeing in the media for years. A great deal of today's social norms and ideals directly go against people's sexuality if it does not comply with their own personal values, and in turn, these preconceived notions get directly translated to what is viewed in many people's favorite movies or television shows.

One particular sexuality that gets the most backlash is that of the gay community, more specifically, gay men. Gay men have been a main target of homophobia for years due to the way that they step away from the stereotypical features of masculinity and sometimes present themselves in a different or more feminine manner. Gay men are thought of to be promiscuous and only in it for the sex and the experience rather than for a long, committed romantic relationship. This idea can be toxic for the community as it may make men believe that they are undeserving of love from others and that they are "not man enough" for society.

A movie that is known to exemplify this trope is the 2016 film entitled, *Moonlight*. While it should be noted that this film did, in fact, contribute vastly to the gay community as a whole and one many awards for its representation of the black gay community, it still relies heavily on

the stereotypes around the difference between how gay and straight men should act. The film follows Chiron as he goes through three various chapters in his life; the first chapter shows how he was raised in a poor community by a father-like figure after his biological family had mistreated him, the second chapter leads into his teenage years, where he struggles to fit in with the other kids due to his “feminine” differences until he meets his best friend Kevin who is there for him when the others pick on him. The two friends eventually engage in sexual exploration at the beach, in which Chiron leans into what he believes his sexuality is as a gay man. Finally, the third chapter leads into Chiron’s life as an adult after being arrested for his aggression and turning into a “man” by becoming hard and not showing his true emotions, before the end where he sees Kevin once more to tell him how he truly feels (*Moonlight*, 2016).

The combination of events that takes place in the film makes it seem like a gay man cannot truly live as himself but must instead change who he is and “harden up” in order to be accepted in today’s society. Throughout the film, you see Chiron loses his form of self-expression and loses who he is as a person (*Moonlight*, 2016). This can cause members of the gay community to think one can either be gay and secluded from society or in the closet and “just like everyone else.”

As stated in an article by Yohana Desta titled, “Most LGBTQ Movie Characters Are Marginalized, Invisible, or Punchlines,” Desta further exemplifies this issue revealing out of 125 film releases, “only 23 (18.4 percent) included characters identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer” (Desta, Most LGBTQ Movie Characters). What is even more disheartening about this fact is that out of those films that were representative of queer characters, most of them portrayed gay men in a stereotypical, comedic, or toxic light, not

indicative of how gay men actually act in our society. This can cause people to think of gay men differently or as token characters that make them feel better about their own lives.

What this trope gets severely wrong, however, is that a majority of gay men do not portray themselves in these lights and are simply trying to use their sexuality as a way to express themselves freely as who they are and be proud of the way that they want to live their life. Gay men are extremely capable of living happy and fulfilling lives that do not need to revolve around pure sexual encounters or one-night flings, with many starting long affectionate relationships with their partners and even getting married or starting families as the years go on.

Unfortunately, the media makes it exceptionally hard for them to do such things as they are constantly set back by the notion that gay men are only in it for the sex or that gay men are too emotional, and so their own masculinity should be put into question.

In order to fix these stereotypes in gay men and other LGBTQ+ individuals, people must truly learn to recognize that love may not be just between a man and woman but rather a man and a man or woman and woman etc. and this does not mean that the love is any less valid or that the relationship is any less worthy. Films need to do their best to start incorporating more gay relationships with happy endings and realistic goals and expectations; they need to stop creating films revolving around summer flings or hidden relationships and realize that gay people can be just as open with who they are as their straight counterparts. In doing this, the gay community will begin to feel more accepted in society, and society will start to become more accepting of them.

In conclusion, myths, tropes, and stereotypes in movies can be immensely harmful to the groups in which they are targeting. This can cause many people in society to perceive these people, places, and things as wrong or different and can cause negative or irrational feelings



toward them. Nonetheless, this does not have to be the case, and filmmakers can make a determined and conscious effort in order to break down these stereotypes once and for all and create an accepting community of people with stories that accurately represent what they are portraying on the screen. In doing so, the world can take a step in the right direction and become more accepting of everyone living in it.

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