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Better Dead than Disabled: Analysis of Me Before You

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Abstract

Hollywood portrays disabled people as vulnerable, a “drain” on society’s resources, and (for men) as less masculine. In this sense, disabled men become alienated both on and off screen. Therefore, the manifest function of the film *Me Before You* is showing the disabled as sensitive, vulnerable with special needs, and in a romance, but the latent function reveals what Hollywood really thinks of disabled community as “better dead than disabled.” In this examination of the film *Me Before You* I use a sociological analysis with the sub-components of deviance, manifest function, latent function, and alienation. I will also focus on hegemonic and subordinate masculinities and disability and how they are portrayed in Hollywood movies. This paper makes use of the work of prominent scholars who focus on masculine heterosexual masculine men, as well as euthanasia and disability.

Keywords: Sociological method, disabled, man box, masculinity, euthanasia, media.

Better Dead than Disabled: Analysis of *Me Before You*

This paper examines Hollywood portrayals of disability in the film *Me Before You* through the lens of sociology, critically examining its troubling “better dead than disabled” trope. Noting that the media play an important role in societal messages about disability, this research will analyze the film according to the “norm” of society, using deviance, alienation and the sociological method to examine in depth the character, Will, and his journey from hegemonic to subordinate masculinity due to disability.

In this analysis, the related theory addresses hegemonic vs subordinate masculinity and how ideas are implemented in boys from a young age to become a masculine man. As Katz (2011) describes masculinity, “At any given time, the class structure and gender order produce numerous masculinities stratified by socioeconomic class, racial and ethnic difference, and sexual orientation. The central delineation is between the hegemonic, or dominant, masculinity (generally, White, heterosexual, and middle class) and the subordinated masculinities” (p. 261). This theory is fundamental to understanding *Me Before You* and the relation of hegemonic to subordinate masculinity in the character, Will.

While the manifest function is the film’s intended message—and the message that the audience can easily take away—I will also examine the latent function: the hidden message in the film. In the film *Me Before You*, the manifest function acts through a love story involving Will and his caretaker Louisa; in the process, two troubling messages emerge about masculinity and disability. The film seems to directly equate disability with the loss of masculinity. This leads to a conclusion that the latent

function of the film is to show that those who are disabled do not fit into the “norm” of society and are not considered “normal.” Therefore, in this paper, I examine the film *Me Before You* using the sociological method and the subcomponent deviance and alienation, along with the manifest function and latent function, to get to the roots of the analysis that shows that the only one option that remains for those disabled individuals is the trope of being: “better off dead than disabled.”

Frameworks: Method and Theoretical Analysis

In analyzing this film, I use the sociological method and the sub-components of deviance and alienation, as well as addressing the manifest and latent functions. This research first defines the sociological method as a lens for viewing the film and relies on the work of several prominent scholars. The sociological method is an essential way to get to the root of the film’s ideology. Therefore, it is important to first define the method. Sociology focuses on the groups and functions of institutions, as explained by Berger (2012). This method is “useful to differentiate sociology from other social sciences, such as anthropology, political science, and psychology, by looking at the core concepts of these differing fields. The basic concern in sociology is how groups and institutions function” (Berger, 2012, p. 107). Berger (2004) best describes the definitions of both the manifest function and the latent function. However, as already mentioned, it is important to note that the manifest function acts as the most intentional message, while the latent function is the deeper message behind the film. This analysis will focus on the latent function to better understand that deeper purpose. Berger (2004) describes “[t]he manifest functions of some activity, entity, or institution” as, “those that are obvious and intended. Manifest functions contrast with latent functions, which are hidden and

unintended. The manifest function of going to a political rally is to show one's support for a candidate; the latent function might be to meet someone with similar political views" (p. 72). In other words, the manifest function is the superficial and the most obvious message, while the latent function is the hidden message; in most cases it is also the ideology. The latent functions are best described as being the "hidden, unrecognized, and unintended functions of some activity, entity, or institution. They are contrasted by social scientists with manifest functions, which are recognized and intended" (Berger, 2004, p. 72). This method helps interpret the ideology that Hollywood presents in movies using disabled people.

While the manifest function is the intended message delivered to the audience and the take away they get from watching a film the latent message is the one that tends to be hidden and most cases shares an unintentional message and often it is not noticed by the audience that are watching the film. To further elaborate on the manifest function and the difference between manifest and latent functions, Berger explains, "[T]he manifest function of television news programs might be to inform, whereas the latent function of these programs might be to indoctrinate viewers with certain political values and beliefs" (Berger, 2012, p. 115). Understanding how the film's manifest function acts in direct contrast to the latent function is key and will be explored.

At its heart, sociological study moves beyond these functions to an analysis of alienation and deviance. This research focuses this type of analysis to uncover deeper messages of the film about the relationship between disability and masculinity. Berger (2005) states that alienation means a person feels like a stranger who does not belong to a group in society. Berger (2005) also states that "Alienation means, literally, 'no ties,'

and refers to a feeling of estrangement and separation from others. A person who is alienated feels like 'a stranger' (alien), with no connections to his or her society or to some group in society" (p. 110). Alienation means that an individual feels isolated from society and senses a barrier between the self and the world. We will return to this term, but will now move on to the next important term that is key to understand before getting to the analysis of the film.

Deviance is another important term that has a close connection with alienation, yet differs because of its behavior patterns that are often seen over time. It also looks at how individuals adapt to changes that occur. This term is best described by Berger (2005):

Deviance refers to behavioral patterns that are different from typical or conventional (some would say normal) ones. Attitudes toward different forms of deviance change over time. For instance, homosexuality was once considered criminal but now is defined as deviant and is tolerated by most people. Deviance generates anxiety in people because it forces them to consider how valid their own practices are as well as the correctness of their own attitudes about what is normal. (p. 114)

Often, the sociological perspective reveals that those individuals who are marked as "deviant" by society find themselves also alienated from it.

Literature Review

To place this analysis into the context of masculinity and disability, the first section of this literature review will focus on disability and the media, while the second section will focus on hegemonic masculinity. Disability has always been part of human

life and has traditionally been seen by society as unfortunate. Nonetheless, some people are born with disabilities, which become natural for their bodies, although it is still labeled “abnormal.”

Reynolds (2017) reviews the “ableist conflation” and the meaning behind it. Reynolds (2017) examines disability and the revelation of health communication and the worries that the disabled individual faces, such as managing bodily fluids when the body is dysfunctional due to a disease. Diseases then cause the body to develop side effects. For example, when an individual is diagnosed with cancer, the body starts to create fluids caused by the disease. A person who is diagnosed with mesothelioma cancer might then become, in the eyes of society, a disabled person due to the illness. A person with mesothelioma cancer will suffer the side effect of an orange fluid that develops in the stomach and then spreads to other parts of the body, such as the lungs. The disease starts devouring the human body until it leads to its final destination: death.

This example is one of many that exist among individuals who become disabled due to a disease. However, it is important to note that all disabled individuals face different kinds of dysfunctional side effects in their bodies depending to their diagnoses. Reynolds (2017) states,

Despite being assailed for decades by disability activists and disability studies scholars spanning the humanities and social sciences, the medical model of disability still today structures too many cases of patient-practitioner communication. This model conceptualizes disability as an individual tragedy or misfortune due to genetic or environmental insult. (p. 1)

This model of conceptualizing disability relates to Will's bodily transformation in the film and his shift from a figure representing hegemonic masculinity to that of a subordinate individual.

Jarman (2008) also focuses on disability studies and how disabled people are marginalized in society. Addressing disability ethics and the debates between choices, Jarman (2008) observes that “[d]iscussing ethics from a disability perspective becomes all the more urgent and complex as we look at some of the most polarizing debates about human life, such as selective abortion, euthanasia, and the potential eugenic outcomes of prenatal testing and genetic technological advances” (p.5). Jarman (2008) offers insight into what is occurring in society and what kind of ideas are disseminated in mass media, which helps shape messages that are delivered to the audience.

Stevens (2008) examines disabilities in the United States in depth, particularly how disabled people are segregated from society, stating, “People with disabilities in the United States have historically been subjected to egregious forms of segregation and social devaluing” (p. 15). Stevens (2008) further notes:

A disability studies public policy course focused on sexual issues would need to examine the role of the media as a form of public policy. By analyzing its power to construct, define, and perpetuate the value of people with disabilities. The media shapes our sexual subjectivities as much as public policy itself has the capacity to regulate. (p. 18)

The media, therefore, plays a big part in creating ideologies and making people think that certain groups of people are supposed to adhere to a certain model or be a specific way.

The media also creates stereotypes to help entrench those messages. As Stevens (2008) describes:

For the most part, disability is ignored by the media. But when people with disabilities are represented in large, commercial media, it is typically in a stereotypical manner, thus enforcing the medical model of disability. The dominant narratives of disability, including the “pathetic crip” and the “supercrip,” are pervasive in media representation and thereby transmit into widely accepted super cultural notions. (p. 19)

In other words, the disabled people are not only marginalized from society but also portrayed in the media as being the pitiful individuals. This becomes the accepted media model for representing disabled people: stereotyped and portrayed as the powerful (patriarchal) group wants. Therefore, disabled individuals are only being used as stereotypical characters in order to create the storyline of being inclusive and including all as equal. But in reality, the way that the disabled group is portrayed in the film must be stereotyped as the only way to be accepted in the film industry and therefore society. This demonstrates the ideology of disabled individuals.

Mitchell (2008) noted the media’s use of “schemas” as the only acceptable form of showing disabled people in the media, and in particular in movies. He spoke specifically of stereotyped images, which are often harmful to the way that people are viewed. According to Mitchell (2008), “If stereotypes are harmful why would we have them? The short answer is because it simplifies life. Stereotypes are based on schemas. A schema is a set of characteristics that describe a common event or group

(p. 24). Creating the schemas allowed for a simplified way to tell a story in the media and using stereotypes has unfortunately shaped the way that movies are created.

One stereotype in particular is present in Will's depiction in *Me Before You*. Mitchell (2008) described this stereotype as "The Civilian Superstar: a world class performer in such fields as sports, the arts, politics, and medicine who seldom allows his or her disability to interfere with career goals" (p. 26). This is the one of the most commonly used of the stereotypes applied to disabled characters in movies, especially seen in the character of Will.

Various scholars have defined hegemonic masculinity (Berger, 2005; Katz, 2011; Reynold, 2004). Berger (2005), for example, states

Hegemony thus is what might be described as 'that which goes without saying,' or the givens or commonsense realities of the world, which, it turns out, serve an ultimate purpose—that of maintaining the dominance of the ruling class. The works carried by the mass media can be seen, then, not merely as carriers of ideology that manipulate and indoctrinate people with certain views. The media, as unwitting instruments of hegemonic domination, have much broader and deeper influence—they shape people's very ideas of themselves and the world; they shape people's worldviews. (p. 62)

In other words, those in the hegemonic group are the ruling class, and the media shares messages that contain the ideas of the hegemonic group.

Messerschmidt (2001) notes the behavior of men and what it takes to be hegemonic, stating that "[b]ehavior by men is obviously considerably more complex than is suggested by the idea of universal masculinity that is performed and embedded

in the individual prior to social action” (p. 66). Messerschmidt (2001) also describes men’s behavior as more complicated, to show that the hegemonic man is indoctrinated into the idea of what masculine behavior should look like. Moreover, Messerschmidt (2001) states that these ideas do not appear overnight, but take time, social structure and experience. “These practices,” Messerschmidt (2001) notes, “do not, however, occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are influenced by the gender ideals that we have come to accept as normal and proper and by the social structural constraints that we experience” (p. 66). In other words, these ideas of what a hegemonic man is are formed at a very young age.

Reynold (2004) studied hegemonic ideas and the construction of identity for boys in primary school, particularly ten and eleven year olds, stating “Alternative masculinities are imbued with power relations and boys who stray or contest the hegemonic ideal (which is contextually and culturally contingent and thus can vary between schools and communities) can incur high social and emotional costs and be subjected to a number of Othering practices in which their deviation from hegemonic norms are subordinated and pathologized (p. 249). Here, the author is referring to the subordinate individual as the “other,” meaning that the subordinate individual is not part of the hegemonic idea and therefore is viewed as “other,” like a simple object that is unspecified and does not matter. With this background information and all the main terms defined, we have the necessary tools to understand on forward the analysis of the film. However we will first look into the summary of the film *Me Before You* to gain context and then I will follow with the sociological analysis and lastly the ideology.

Film Summary

The film *Me Before You* is based on a novel by Jojo Moyes, published in the United Kingdom in 2012. Its message had such an important impact that it was produced as a film. The film focuses on the main protagonist, Will. Will is a heterosexual man and a successful upper-class banker who owns a beautiful home. He is also a wealthy model and sportsman. Louisa Clark is the female protagonist, an outgoing girl who works at a café. Unlike Will, she is from the lower class. Other characters in the film include Will's mother and father and his nurse, Nathan. There is also Louisa's family: her mother, father, and sister Katrina and her son. Other characters are Patrick, Louisa's boyfriend, Will's best friend Rupert, and Alice, his ex-girlfriend.

The first scene opens with Will and his girlfriend Alice in bed. Upon waking, Will prepares for his workday in his luxurious white house. He takes a shower and says that he will make dinner that night. He is wearing a business suit and looks very masculine. In the next scene, the film then transitions to Will's tragic accident where a motorcycle has run him over and left him a quadriplegic. This scene marks the beginning of what Will considers his horrific life, a disabled life that changed him forever.

While Will and his family are very wealthy, Louisa's is the opposite. She lives with her parents, sister, nephew and grandpa. She gets fired because the café closed, so she finds a new job when Will's mom hires Louisa in hopes that she will provide Will company and help him to love life again, much as he did before becoming quadriplegic. Will's life shifts from being able to do everything, to needing help with everything from eating, bathing, etc. For these reasons, Will wants to end his life. He has gone through

an unexpected transformation from being the perfect man, the hegemonic, to what is considered the “abnormal” and unwanted or subordinate in society due to his disability.

After Louisa finds out that Will wants to end his life, she plans activities and takes him on a trip to the island of Mauritius, hoping to make him love life again. However, she fails. Will tells her that nothing will ever make him change his mind and he plans to take his own life in Switzerland. This specific scene is a representation of choosing death rather than love. Louisa is also devastated and returns home heartbroken and in tears. The film ends in a similar way to the beginning: in all-white, natural light atmosphere. But, this time, Will is immobile. With Will’s parents and Louisa’s final kiss, he lies in bed, slowly dying.

Sociological Analysis: How Hollywood Perpetuates the “Better Dead than Disabled” Stereotype

One of the most salient aspects of the film is the separation Will feels from society due to his disability. Therefore, this analysis begins with the sociological concept of alienation, then follows up with deviance. When society labels someone as deviant or “other,” it functions to alienate that person. Utilizing the sociological method, I will look at the two main functions of the film.

The manifest function is the intended message created and the one that the audience should take away, while the latent message is the unintended and the hidden one that needs to be analyzed in depth to understand the meaning. To better understand the transformation that Will undergoes from being the hegemonic man to the subordinate man, it is important to understand the term ‘man box,’ meaning that a man needs to have the qualities of being hegemonic: masculine, strong, smart, wealthy,

heterosexual, dominating, successful, powerful and sporty. These are some of the main examples of the qualities that fit in the 'man box' and that a man needs to have in order to fit in the box. These are the expectations taught to men at a young age until the end of their life. Because Will no longer fits into the 'man box' of being highly masculine, due to his disabilities, he no longer feels he fits into society. Therefore, he becomes alienated from the "norm" of society.

Katz (2015) offered more insight into the qualities required to fit in the man box, as he stated that "[t]he discourse around muscles as signifiers of masculine power involves not only working- class men but also middle- class and upper-class men" (p. 268). In this way, the film signifies the manifest function of what a man should be. In other words if a man does not meet this criteria, he is considered the subordinate and the 'other'.

In the film Will is portrayed as hegemonic as seen during the clip scene of him performing sports that require a lot of strength, especially snowboarding, one of Will's favorite hobbies. As a white heterosexual upper class male, Will was a model, played sports, traveled luxuriously, and gained all the attractive women, but after his accident he could no longer fulfill what a 'real man' should do.. As Berger (2012), speaking of football, states: "It teaches us how to get along in society, what roles to play, what rules to follow, what life is all about, and so on" (p.156). This is a clear example of the belief of society, media, and those in power in constructing a view of what the world should be like. As the protagonist, Will did not have a motive to continue with life because he felt alienated from society and could no longer perform as an active man. This is a clear example of how Will transforms from the perfect hegemonic man to the subordinate. He

is therefore stereotyped in the film as Mitchell (2008) describes as “The Civilian Superstar” stereotype. In this case, Will is the greatest performer in sports and career until his disability interferes with all his abilities, therefore making him fail in all.

Me Before You displays these qualities by having the specific masculine, heterosexual male character, Will, becomes subordinate due to his disability and therefore acting out as the trope of being “better dead than disabled” and living in a world where society does not accept the deviant figure. Moreover, the ideal of society is to be ‘normal’ rather than alienated. If an individual does not fit into the ‘man box,’ then they will be alienated from society’s ideal and seen as deviant.

In addition, in order to understand disability and deviance it is vital to note the importance that Reynolds (2017) assigns to the semiosis of pain: “[t]he pain of torture, the pain of unrequited love, or the pain of a life lived with chronic pain” (p. 6).

Throughout the film, Will has the feeling of chronic pain as a side effect from his paralysis, along with the pain of living a life he does not want. The pain of his disability and the pain of love leads to his decision to kill himself. This ties in with Reynolds’ (2017) analysis of pain and mortality:

If one then conflates experiences of disability with pain and thereby mortality, then it is no wonder that people say and think, ‘I’d rather be dead than disabled.’

It is in large part due to the ableist conflation that people with disabilities experience such stigma, disparagement, and misunderstanding—to the point that they are entirely left out of models of flourishing. (p. 8)

Me Before You takes this further showing the controversy of euthanasia as an alternative to the alienation Will feels, through both his decision for suicide and the

contrary actions of Louisa and his mother. Since Will has become disabled, he no longer meets the social norms of being normal. He does not fit into the “man box,” which makes him deviant. Even as he accepts society’s dominant ideology, he is no longer accepted by society because he is disabled, a quadriplegic. In his discussion of ideologies, Hall (2015) stated that they “produce different forms of social consciousness, rather than being produced by them. They work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises” (p. 105). The ideology of the film *Me Before You* is that people who are disabled do not fit into the norm of society and are thus defined by deviance.

According to the film, individuals who have deviated from society have no choice but to die. Moreover, the film suggests that heterosexual males with a dominant power like Will are powerful and the ideal; however, if they are subordinate they do not belong to the hegemonic group. As Michels (1968) stated regarding subordinate groups,

It is tacitly presupposed that those members of a party who do not belong to the class which that party represents will renounce their personal interests whenever these conflict with the interests of the proletarian class. On principle, the heterogeneous elements will subordinate themselves to the ‘idea’ of a class to which they themselves do not belong. (pg. 351)

It is clear that the film portrays heterosexual masculinity and its importance in society, while becoming quadriplegic after being an active man leads to only one option: death.

Will is a product of what society wants a man to be. After Will is exploited by the ideology of society, he no longer serves the purpose of being that “man box” figure, so it

is believed that Will is better off dead than disabled. In this light, Althusser (2009) suggests that “you and I are always-already subjects, and as such constantly practise the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (p.510). This suggests that individuals, such as Will, are conscious and can identify the semiotics of what it means to be a real man.

When the film begins, Will is a white heterosexual male who owns his power by putting himself first, as the movie title indicates: *Me Before You*. Yet after his accident, because he is no longer the individual he used to be, he no longer fits in the man box. This means that Will follows the ideology of society rather than accepting himself as disabled. In this way, the film shows the power of the man above all and the privilege of the young white heterosexual man to make his own decisions, even if it means choosing euthanasia over love, family, and life itself.

In relation to the power of men, one of the most successful American radio shows of all times is the *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. It has become a top-rated radio program in the United States, with his show broadcast through the Armed Forces Radio Network. Limbaugh was listed in Forbes magazine as the highest paid announcer in the media. Katz (2015), reflects on the power of masculine authority in an examination of *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, stating, “Limbaugh and his colleagues and imitators speak with an old-school masculine authority that recalls an idealized past, when (White) men were in control in the public and private spheres, and no one was in position to actively challenge their power” (p. 157). The privilege of being a white upper-class heterosexual male not only shows the power he has but also represents that society has created an

ideology of being better off white and wealthy than being a subordinate class. This gives Limbaugh the authority for his persona but also transmits that message worldwide. The audience tunes in to listen to the topic that is discussed on the radio show because the host is a white male who fits into the “man box” of masculinity.

This is a clear example that connects to the identity of Will in the film. Although he ended up quadriplegic, he maintained his old-school masculinity: no one had the right to question his decision for euthanasia. This relates to upper-class heterosexual masculine men who have power and dominate. Moreover, because the film is a romance, it suggests that the ideal men that women should be attracted to are those like Will, because they are masculine, successful, and play sports.

In the film, Louisa breaks up with her boyfriend, who is poor, and enters a romantic relationship with Will, which points out that Will is the perfect man every woman should want. This reflects the relation of power dynamics, meaning different people and different groups and the way these groups interact with each other. It is important to note that the power lays with the group that is usually upper-class and wealthy, in this case, with Will and his social group, which is the dominant hegemonic group.

Louisa is not of the same class as Will and lives in the outskirts of the city, making Louisa an outsider and unable to meet Will's standards. This suggests that Louisa and her social group are marginalized from society while the power rests with upper-class groups. This is evident in the way the two women in Will's life, Alicia and Louisa, are portrayed differently. Alicia left Will because he no longer fit in the man box, so Will no longer belongs to the powerful group. Therefore, Alicia marries Will's best

friend. As for Will, he does not accept Louisa's love even though he transitions into a figure no longer accepted in society and falls from the powerful group to the less powerful group: those who are the marginalized individuals of society. However, because of the social ideology that Will still follows, he chooses death over life.

The hegemonic ideas of society have influence over decision-making in real life, as well as that ideological model of fitting into society's norms. Years ago a film, titled *The Sea Inside*, told the true story of a man who became disabled and fought a long battle to die. In the end, we were meant to celebrate his death—much the same as *Me Before You*. Is this a coincidence? Likely not, since this seems to be the way Hollywood treats disability.

Ideology and the Latent function

What this sociological analysis has shown is that while the film's manifest function is to give an inclusive message about disability and masculinity, the deeper latent message equates Will's disability with loss of masculinity and, even worse, suggests that the only path for Will is death.

The manifest message of the film is shown as Will is disabled and sitting in a wheelchair but is still living in a society that accepts him. But due to his shift of life and becoming the "ableist conflation," he no longer wants to live and chooses euthanasia, reflecting the trope 'better dead than disabled.'

Will has been presented as the hegemonic man who is then transformed into being disabled, which makes him subordinate. Therefore, this makes him deviant from the "man box," so because he perceives that he is not being accepted under the social norms, he chooses euthanasia to regain his power. In the end, we are meant to

celebrate his death. The final thought and decision is on Will, because he is the man who once had all the power. Yet because of his disability, he tries to regain his masculinity power by making his voice heard again, even if it means taking his life.

The ideology of the film *Me Before You* is that people who are disabled do not fit into the norm of society. Those individuals who are alienated from society have no choice but to die. Moreover, the film *Me Before You* suggests that heterosexual males with a dominant power like Will's are worthless when they become subordinate. It is clear that the film portrays heterosexual masculinity and its importance in today's society as of greater value than being quadriplegic after being an active man. This leads to death as the only option.

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