

Examination of the Portrayal of Cancer in Media

My name is Reeya Khurana and I was 13 years old when I had a lobectomy done. For those of you who do not know what a lobectomy is, I had half of my thyroid removed due to the growth of a cancerous nodule. Now little 13 year old me had no idea what it meant to get my thyroid removed; all I saw was a big scar against the lining of my neck every time I looked in the mirror. I never really spent too much time thinking about my surgery or how it affected me till now. I guess that's what taking a FWS on the Dimensions of Cancer really got me to do. Just bringing up some feelings that I usually would've ignored, but for some reason I didn't ignore them for this class. After hearing numerous stories about how cancer has affected the lives of so many people, it just got me to think, "Wow, people are so open about their experiences with cancer, I certainly am not, maybe now I can be, but before this I was not at all. What allows people to be this open with random college freshman?" When we had guest lectures, I could definitely see some hesitation. Yes, the guests seemed to be open and approachable, but even then I could sense a little bit of hesitation. And I wasn't afraid to ask them. I simply asked one of the guests in private about her sense of hesitation. I asked, "You seem to have hesitated a little bit during the discussion. If you don't mind me asking, what causes that hesitation?" And all the woman said back to me was, "You must've been through a similar experience because if you hadn't, you wouldn't have noticed my hesitation. You know how it is... some things are easy to share, others aren't so we choose not to, but that decision making process is what causes the hesitation." It's strange because sharing my story hasn't always been the easiest thing and hearing the guest speakers made me realize that I wasn't alone in this area. Ultimately, that is what led to want to complete a project that examined the way in which people choose to discuss some details, but leave out others. And I believe the best way to see this through is researching the portrayal of cancer in media because media is one of the biggest methods to release information to a large audience and so much material is known to be censored in media, whether that be in books, movies, or in the news. Researching why directors tell actors to act in a specific way or choose to incorporate some scenes and not others, while authors depict a story in a certain way, or how news broadcasters choose to leave out information, leads to an answer to my question: what allows people to share their experiences and if they choose not to, what holds them back from doing so?

Part 1: Literature

To further examine how cancer is portrayed in books, I thought I would start by reading [The Cancer Journals](#) by Audre Lorde. This book has such a simple concept, yet is so specific due to the crucial details it conveys. Simple as in it focuses around the life of a Black, lesbian, feminist who was diagnosed with breast cancer and specific as in it lays each part of how her life changed due to the diagnosis. The book focuses on three main areas: The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, Breast Cancer: A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience, and Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis. Rather than explaining each part, I would like to focus on one thing I noticed that relates to my project.

After Audre Lorde had her right breast removed, rather than choosing reconstruction, plastic surgery, or prosthetics, she chose to acknowledge the loss of her breast. She didn't talk much about this decision, which surprised me because she chose to not use something that could've helped her pretend like nothing even happened to her. She could've chosen to use

something that would have helped her gain her original identity back. And considering how much cancer does have the ability to shape someone's identity, I was shocked when I was reading this section because she chose not to discuss the decision in much detail. Lorde touched on details in regards to her decision to get her breast removed, her support groups, life after surgery and how she dealt with a new identity, but for some reason she did not discuss the decision to not cover up her surgery in much detail. It caught me off guard because I remember when I got my surgery, all I could think about was how I was going to cover up the scar that everyone would see and would be the reason why people asked me about what happened. I remember wishing so many times that the scar would just disappear. I tried so many things to make the scar fade, doing research online of how to get rid of scars to going to the doctor's office to see what he would say about an ointment that would hide the scar, but ultimately what I had to result to was it fading away by itself. But it didn't have to be the same way for Lorde, if she used prosthetics, her surgery results could have been hidden. I want to know what went through her mind when she was making this decision, why talk about the details of how the surgery went and all the support she had, but not discuss the decision to not get plastic surgery or anything done? Lorde does discuss the influence of using prosthetics, in the sense of women feeling like they are simply objects of attraction and in order to fulfill that expectation, often women who receive mastectomy's do use prosthetics. But she does not address her own personal decision of not using them. She talks more about how other women's identities have changed due to the usage of prosthetics, but she doesn't acknowledge her own decision. So my question becomes very simple and clear, why not discuss that decision? Why choose to discuss the influence of using prosthetics, but not fully address her own choices?

Part II: Movies

A movie that has received much attention from the public about the portrayal of cancer is The Fault in Our Stars. This movie is based on a true story of two teenagers who are both diagnosed with terminal cancer and struggle to find a balance between loving each other and learning to love the life they were given. Although the film is based off of true story, many details of the real, true story were left out. In an interview with the director of The Fault in Our Stars, it was noted that rather than retelling Esther Earl's story, the female in real life, the director chose to create the fictional character of Hazel because he felt as if Esther's story belonged to Esther and her family only. The director added that because he could not exactly depict the exact story, it was difficult to portray very emotional scenes. This is because the movie's Augustus Waters character and Hazel's romance with him were fictional and many of the emotional centered scenes in the movie were due to the romance conflicting with the cancer. So to go from conveying emotions just from the cancer, to conveying emotions including the romance was difficult. It was noted that the director had to take out some of these emotional scenes because it was especially difficult to determine how to convey the family's emotions about the romance and the cancer. Although the entire movie was filled with different emotions, making those emotions seem accurate was the difficult part. It is very hard to identify the affect of cancer on one's family members because some people are very open to showing their emotions and others are not. That is why the director chose to stir away from depicting the family's emotions and rather focused on conveying the main character's emotions.

Furthermore, another thing I would like to add about The Fault in Our Stars is that recently the real life couple that the movie was based off of passed away. The way in which this

was mentioned in the news was interesting because when I first read the news in USA Today, the first thing I instantly noticed was that the article had a large focus on simply who the individuals were and not the emotional impact on the individuals or their families. The article stuck to simply telling the facts without discussing the aftermath of the deaths. If I were to guess as to why the article chose to not discuss emotions, I would assume that it is because cancer is a very touchy subject and they just wanted to get to the point of what has occurred. Maybe it isn't the news's role to discuss emotions because then it could come across as the news suggesting how the public should feel or maybe the emotions are too personal to the individuals. But then my question becomes why make a movie about the individual if the news refuses to discuss the emotional impact? What about the audience prevents the news from discussing an emotional impact?

Part III: News

A current area of concern is the portrayal of cancer in the news because some believe that cancer is gaining too much attention at times. Many people believe that news channels and news broadcasters tend to focus on cancer during health discussions primarily because of its vast research occurring all around the world; however, people are concerned that other diseases are not getting enough attention. For instance, some say that they have noticed that as soon as new findings have been made about cancer, it is the news within 24 hours; many other findings about other diseases do not even get published in the news. Thus, as per the portrayal of cancer in the news, sometimes it is given too much attention due to the build-up it has had in history. "Respiratory consultant, Dr. Toby Maher of the British Lung Foundation argues that while constant efforts are made by Governments and Health Organizations to learn more about cancer, other diseases with similar rates of incidence and mortality should be given the same priority" (BBC). This argument of priorities makes me think that maybe the reason news broadcasters choose not to discuss the emotional influence of cancer is because that would allow for more of a reaction from an audience, compared to if the audience was exposed to a news article on how to treat a disease. Maybe cancer allows for more of an emotional impact that the news broadcasters feel other diseases don't necessarily always portray, and maybe they don't want their audience to feel as if they are prioritizing one disease over the other?

On the other hand, I have observed that when Cancer is discussed specifically in the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine and in other Cornell news sources, it is less research based and discusses more of cancer's impact on the community. More specifically, I found an article released by the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine that discusses an event between cancer survivors and Cornell students in which a workshop took place where cancer scientists and cancer patients had lectures and discussions about how cancer influences their lives. Nothing in the article is research based; rather, it is all based upon the types of conversations that took place during the workshop. I think the reason that the article is presented this way is because if it were more research based, it would be very similar to any typical cancer article released in the news. But because it had the audience of the greater Cornell student body and Ithaca community, it chose to focus on the conversational aspect of the workshop which is more neutral in the sense that it doesn't have a large emotional appeal and it also has the potential to be understood by anyone in the audience because one doesn't necessarily need to know the research side of cancer to understand the article. Consequently, I think that many news broadcasters also feel the need to filter what they release because they have to be able to appeal to their audience. And I think this

is a large part of news regarding cancer because if people are interested they will read it, but if it is the same related research consistently showing in the news, people will lose interest. I think that is a crucial thing that news broadcasters must consider when choosing what to release in the news because in order to influence the audience, one must know who their audience is.

Conclusion:

Overall, I think the decision of what to share with the public ultimately depends on who your audience is as well as the influence cancer has had on the audience. Sometimes, cancer has a large emotional impact and some people will choose to accept the emotional influence and will be willing to share their experience. Other times people may choose to not discuss their experiences because they don't want to have an emotional influence on the audience. Sometimes it becomes too personal, and some people are ready to become more personal and others are not. The balance of being able to be personable so people understand your story, but also being able to stress the importance of your story is a difficult balance that people struggle to portray which is why filtering exists in society and in our media.

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