**Mental Illness Portrayed in Benny & Joon**

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Benny & Joon, the 1993 movie starring Aidan Quinn, Mary Stuart Masterson and Johnny Depp, is classified as a “romantic comedy.” From my first viewing of it, I classified it in my mind as a quirky drama, rather than a comedy. To me, the primary theme of the movie was not the relationship between Sam (Depp) and Joon (Masterson), but between Joon and her older brother Benny (Quinn). Benny is a young man, not getting any younger, who was left the care of his neurotic younger sister when their parents died. Benny fights to keep his sister in his care, until a series of events, including Joon “winning” Sam in a poker game, makes him realize that the situation has come to the point where he is no longer able to properly take care of her needs, or his own. A number of mental disorders are presented between the various characters, to varying degrees. Joon is an obsessive-compulsive schizophrenic with peanut butter and fire-starting featuring prominently in her repertoire of neuroses. Sam is obsessed with silent film, and models himself after Buster Keaton's film roles, and has a disabling illiteracy. These features inhibit his ability to function integrally in society, even while allowing him to entertain it. Benny has various forms of mental conflict that do not disable his ability to function in general, but, like most of us, these conflicts have to be worked through to a resolution in order to go on with life and not become disabled.

While some of the conditions and behaviors are exaggerated or twisted for comedy's sake, there are several points that the movie advances forcefully. The first of these is the social aspect of who is considered mentally ill. Ambrosino states that “for each society, there is a continuum, with certain definitely unacceptable behaviors at one end and definitely acceptable and appropriate ones at the other” (200). It is universally agreed, once Benny comes to understand his limitations, that Joon needs mental health treatment that must be provided by professionals. On the other hand, while Sam is marginalized by even his relatives due to his eccentric behavior, no one considers that treatment or training may be required; he's viewed as a clown, rather than anti-social. Benny has issues with anxiety as well, perhaps as a matter of genetics, or perhaps because of the environmental factors of his parents' deaths and the care of his disabled sister. The theme of the movie agrees with Thomas Szasz's argument that “instead of talking about definitions of mental illness, we should talk about problems of living – an individual's struggle with the problem of how to live in our world” (203).

A second well-made point is the effect of mental disorders on the family. The introductory story in chapter 8 of Ambrosio mentions that Joanna's parents made several trips to the doctors for her, and “had difficulty coping with her behavior,” with hospitalizations exhausting their insurance and dealing with continual fighting (196). In the movie, Benny has to be made to realize that he has put his whole life on hold to care for Joon, and he is developing sociological phobias as a result. He has to come to understand that what is best for June is also what is best for him: for her to receive professional treatment that can lead to independence for both of them. Sam's cousin decides not to deal with Sam's eccentricities at all, and gets rid of him at the earliest opportune moment. When we simply write people off, it may seem like stress relief to begin with, but it opens up the opportunity for feelings of guilt for us, and feelings of rejection in the one whom we shun, creating more, less healthy stress in the long run.

Benny & Joon brings home to us the effect our own mental disorders have on ourselves and those around us, as well as presenting those who exhibit “so-called abnormal behaviors” (201) as human persons striving to live their lives as fully as we are trying to live ours; as people with whom we have more rather than less in common with. It emphasizes the fact that there are behaviors that are dangerous and must be treated, and that those who get help can move on to a productive life. It emphasizes that there are those who seem otherwise normal who need help coping with everyday situations and responsibilities; and we are often those people. And it emphasizes that the one we laugh at without understanding may be one who just needs us to try to understand.

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