OPINION

The Romanticizing of Mental Illnesses

BY PRECIOUS VUE

SPENT MY QUARANTINE reading a wide variety of book genres, reading a total of 26 books. I recently recollected my novels, reading the description and parts of my favorite chapters. Of the 26 books I read, I found that 24 of them either had a protagonist who suffered from or developed a mental illness, or the novel was based upon mental manipulation. I was left dumbfounded at how common it is and the inaccuracy of the portrayal. This romanticism of mental illness struck me; how did mental illness become a form of romance?

I was intrigued with the repetitive pattern in romance novels and began questioning the young adult audiences. Are they aware of the romanticizing of mental illness? Is there a lack of young adults being educated enough, or has the topic become so modernized as an aesthetic?

I decided to inspect the young adult section at Barnes & Noble. Some common mental illnesses in these romance novels were depression, anxiety, PTSD, psychopathy,

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paranoia, substance abuse, Stockholm syndrome, and Lima syndrome. The list goes on. I discovered that mental illnesses seem to add "unique" characteristics, a way to add flaws to the protagonists.

Forms of mental illnesses create trials and tribulations for the story and relationships to develop. A character is suffering from depression, which is then emotionally supported by the second lead, then the depression goes away magically, and the two live happily ever after. The majority of the time, the portrayal of mental illnesses is inaccurate or unrealistic. "What I noticed is that characters will be demonized and told to get over it. Depending on the book you read, sometimes mental illness is glorified in books." – J. Johnson, a high school senior.

Let's take an iconic, toxic couple: Joker and Harley Quinn. They are a caricature of Bonnie and Clyde. The Joker suffers from personality disorders, psychopathy, narcissism, and of course, pseudobulbar affect (PBA). He craves attention and shows a lack of empathy. Although he's characterized with mental illnesses and is a sadistic criminal, it's those characteristics that make the Joker the most loveable villain, says Luke Vue, a high school freshman. His insanity makes him unpredictable, and the unpredictability attracts.

Harley Quinn, who at first was the Joker's psychologist, grows sympathetic towards the Joker. She gets manipulated into thinking she cannot exist without him, eventually being physically and mentally abused by him. All this causes her to develop Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD), a desire to be noticed. Harley finds herself committed towards Joker, and together they commit crimes.

Romantic, yes? So now the real question is, why are we finding mentally ill character dynamics romantic?

"... Toxic dynamics are a lot more interesting and bring more to the plot as opposed to a normal healthy couple. The imbalance in power and manipulation is more entertaining to read." – Natalie Gonzalez, a first-year university student.

What we, as a modern society, fail to see is the romanticizing of mental vulnerability. The romanticizing portrays that revealing a cognitive vulnerability is metaphoric to our hearts breaking for someone to patch up. Mental illness does not work like that; it is much more profound. No such words can even explain the process of mental health. There are factors of uncontrollable thoughts, emotions, fears, and so much more.

Rather than writing mental illness poetically and brushing it past as something destigmatized, we need to approach the issue with accurate representations and resolutions. In media with a character portraying a mental illness, there needs to be a history of accurate experience and research done beforehand. There's a fine line between story-telling and informing. Mental illness is an unromantic issue that requires objectivity and accurate portrayals for the young adult audience to better understand the seriousness of the mental illness.

Seeing mental health go from stigmatized to romanticized is disappointing to our modern society. I reflect on my books and think, could the story have been more developed without the romanticizing of mental illness?