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*Me Before You*

As soon as one views the trailer for *Me Before You* it is apparent that this movie is going to be different from most. A 2016 British-American romantic drama film starring a quadriplegic (paralyzed from the neck down) man had many from the disabled community ecstatic, unfortunately much of their excitement soon died when they got to see the film in its entirety. *Me Before You* has many negative stereotypes about living with a disability, like living with a disability is not worth living, but in some ways it also defies stereotypes, by showing that even with a disability as severe as Will's there is enjoyment and love to be found in life.

Originally a book written by Jojo Myers, then turned into a film directed by Thea Sharrock, *Me Before You* is a story of how Will Traynor, a wealthy young banker becomes paralyzed by an accident that happened two years prior to meeting Louisa Clark. She changes Will's cynical outlook when she shows him life is worth living. Louisa, young and quirky, struggling to find a stable job to help support her family stumbles upon a job as a caregiver to a quadriplegic man. Willing to go any length to make sure she helps her family make ends meet, she accepts the position without hesitation. Her job is to watch Will throughout all hours of the day, even though he already has a professional taking care of his medical needs. A total jerk at first, Will slowly warms up to Louisa and throughout the movie they develop a special bond, until Louisa finds out that she was

simply hired to ensure that Will does not attempt to kill himself leading up to his death in a assisted suicide facility in 6 months. Not accepting this predestined fate that Will has set for himself, Louisa is determined to show Will life is worth living by taking him out to many events despite the challenges he faces.

It is often said that *Me Before You* is very stereotypical in the way it portrays a disabled life, and while agreeing with that I also think that in some ways it also defies stereotypes. The mere fact that a quadriplegic man is the lead character in a romance movie is not something that Hollywood sees often, and does shine some positive light on the disabled community contrary to what some would say. The director of the movie, Thea Sharrock, wants us to believe that “It’s a fictional story about how important the right to choose is. The message of the film is to live boldly, push yourself, don’t settle.” This conveys a message that Will did live boldly and got out of his comfort zone with the time he had with Louisa, which in itself defies the stereotype that disabled people never fully experience life or the world. Sharrock is not the only one with a positive take on the film. In an essay written for *Vulture*, Ryan O’Connell, a writer who has cerebral palsy and who had low self-worth as a child, exclaimed: “I was like, ‘OMG, YASSSSSS! Disability is finally in vogue! Let’s get that shit trending on Twitter!’” This shows that *Me Before You* brought attention in a positive way to bigger media outlets and had those who also suffer from disabilities excited about the stereotypes the movie was defying.

Although defying some stereotypes about disabilities, *Me Before You* also has many stereotypes about disabilities as well. The fact that Will ends up killing himself at the end of the movie even after finding love sends a message of death being preferable living with a disability. The ending to the movie made many in the disabled community

upset, like disabled activist Ellen Clifford, who expresses her opinion on the movie and how it depicts a disabled life; “disability is tragedy, and disabled people are better off dead. It comes from a dominant narrative carried by society and the mainstream media that says it is a terrible thing to be disabled.” Will sends a message that even though he has things to live for he cannot bear his disability enough to live with.

At the end of the movie, even after all Louisa’s efforts to convince Will he can have a happy life, he still decides to end his and leaves Louisa behind with nothing but a letter and his wealth. Ryan Gilbey, a respected writer and film critic, claims, “The problem, according to activists who picketed the film’s premiere last week, is this motto applies in this context only to the able-bodied – and comes at the cost of a disabled man’s life.” Will had all the money in the world and could do anything he wanted with it, but he still chose death because of his disability. This is a stereotype that has been portrayed in many movies that have characters with disabilities in them, like *Million Dollar Baby* and *Whose Life is it Anyways?* These films are evidence that the perception of the life of a disabled person has been depicted wrong for many years and in more than one big Hollywood movie.

Another stereotype that is portrayed in *Me Before You* is the way suicide was seen as an option for Will, where as suicide would never be considered okay for an able-bodied person. Actor and activist Liz Carr brings to light this issue of how even suicide is treated differently between disabled and able-bodied people, explaining that able-bodied people considering suicide are to be shown getting the support they need in overcoming their despair. By contrast, she goes on, “When a disabled person talks of it, though, suddenly the conversation is overtaken with words like ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’ and

people are rushing to uphold these prized principles whilst talk of prevention and mental health support are rare.” Will is not offered any psychiatric support. What kind of message is this that we’re giving disabled people and the non-disabled audiences?””

While rarely talked about as much, some forget to realize that suicide is no different between a able-bodied person and one who has a disability. A mainstream stereotype is that it is okay for disabled people to take their life because something is wrong with them, which is much of what *Me Before You* portrays when Will decides to take his own life even after finding love.

*Me Before You* while defying stereotypes still also depicted many mainstream beliefs about those living life with a disability. Americans today tend to believe that a life with disability is a unhappy one and not worth living, and while *Me Before You* showed that a disabled life can be a happy one, it also conveyed the mainstream message that a disabled life is not worth living. Even though the movie ended with Will taking his own life, I believe there was a better way the ending could have conveyed a message that would have been a true representation of a disabled life. *Me Before You* is an example of a movie that has many mainstream stereotypes about those with a disability and the life they lead, and while failing to depict what a life with disability truly looks like it has brought awareness to how much the disabled community and many others are fighting to see a change, which I believe is soon to come in the filmmaking industry.

Works Cited

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