

Collaborative Writing Project #1

Movies often portray many disabilities that can be used as a way to teach the audience about them. One film that does this is *I am Sam*. The main character Sam, portrayed by Sean Penn, has an intellectual disability. Sam ends up having a child, named Lucy, and has to raise her on his own. An intellectual disability is one that affects your mental capacity. There are different levels of this disability based on IQ scores: mild (50-69), moderate (36-49), severe (20-35), and profound (<20). When someone is diagnosed with an intellectual disability, they have limitations in intelligence, adaptive behaviors, and activities in daily living. Some causes of this disability are prenatal mutations (chromosome abnormalities), maternal ingestion of toxins, presence of autism, and many others.

In *I am Sam*, the main character had problems with speaking fluently or doing simple tasks without needing assistance. Throughout the movie, the background was made blue when Sam was sad, and orange when he was happy, which allowed for the audience to feel the way that Sam was feeling through the colors that are typically associated with those emotions. Sam also couldn't understand sarcasm, which is typical with someone who has an intellectual disability because they don't have the mental capacity in order to understand what the person meant. When social services tried to take his daughter, he showed that even with a low IQ and not understanding societal norms, he can care for a child just the same as someone who doesn't have a disability. Sean Penn used a more childish voice while playing the character of Sam, to give the notion that his speaking skills are undeveloped. His voice was displayed as what someone would typically think of when a

person has an intellectual disability, and it's pretty accurate to what you would experience in the real world. Sam would sometimes experience a stutter, or more specifically a block, which is a pause in the air flow while trying to communicate. This was portrayed as him leaving his mouth open, which is sometimes accurate when someone has a block, but there are other ways that it can be portrayed when this occurs. He had a hard time making eye contact while talking, showing that the disability also had a social effect on his life.

Throughout uncomfortable situations, Sam would move his hands around a lot to make himself comfortable, which is typical for someone who has this disability and possible autism. He also had a hard time changing routines because of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that was apparent through multiple scenes in the movie, such as making sure the coffee cups were in order at the Starbucks that he worked at. Sean Penn had a believable performance with his mannerisms and speech patterns, which made it seem like he had this disability his entire life.

I am Sam teaches the audience about this disability and gives them a view into their lives and how people treat and understand them. It shows how people tend to act towards others with this disability, and assume they do not understand. The movie shows realistic moments in Sam's life but makes certain parts over dramatic to add effect, like Hollywood typically does. For example, some of Sam's reactions and behaviors were more dramatic than what would typically occur. The movie is helpful in showing how you can approach people with intellectual disabilities and how they think, but can also be harmful because many people do not understand the disability. The movie portrayed the disability very well, although at times, he acted more like a 7 year old, and when asked certain questions, he was portrayed as more of an adult, which contradicts what his disability and mental

capacity is. The takeaway message for this movie is that even with an intellectual disability, people can still have adult responsibilities and function in society, even if it's against the social norms.

Another movie that also portrays a disability is *King's Speech*. The main character in this movie is the Prince of Wales, eventual King George VI, portrayed by Colin Firth, who had a stutter when he speaks. A stutter is a type of speech disorder that affects the flow of communication. There are different types of stuttering: prolongations, repetitions, and blocks. Prolongations are when a sound is held longer than what is typical, repetitions are when a syllable, sound, or word is repeated several times, and blocks are when the air-flow and articulating movements are almost stopped completely when sound is being made. There are secondary features that can sometimes accompany a stutter, like excessive eye blinking, head nods/movements, hand slapping, foot tapping, etc. Stuttering is the most common fluency disorder and people are not immune from stuttering, no matter the age or gender. Typically stuttering occurs in children by the age of seven and can last 2-4 years. People who stutter can experience disturbances in normal fluency and timing patterns, along with disturbances in social communication, academic performance, or occupational achievement.

In *King's Speech*, King George VI has to give speeches to his people often, since he is a part of the royal family. The King had a severe stutter that would become worse when put in pressure-induced situations, such as speaking during big events. He would typically lash out in anger when he couldn't speak, or smoke cigarettes when nervous to help calm him down. King George VI was able to find a speech therapist that was able to help him with his

stutter, or at least cope with it so that he would be able to speak in public appearances. The way that the King would stutter was mainly in repetitions and prolongations, with the occasional block. Colin was able to portray this accurately by causing the stutters to be different lengths of time, depending on the situation, just like a person would in real life. He also portrayed the stutters correctly by causing the block of air flow when experiencing a block, or even the emotions that would come about when he couldn't speak clearly. Many children that stutter get angry when they can't get the word out that they want because it's frustrating, and Colin portrayed that well. The ending speech, where he and his speech therapist marked up the speech with the areas to pause or other words to use, allowed for the King to be able to speak well and articulate during the radio time. Colin's emotions and voice was spot on to the original speech that was given to announce World War II. He paused when he needed to and was able to still portray what the King would have been feeling at that time with the stuttering, but composing himself so that he was able to do the speech. In real life, that speech is still studied to this day, and Colin did a wonderful job showing how impactful that speech was for the country of Great Britain.

The King's Speech taught the audience a lot about stuttering. The movie goes into detail about other ways that stuttering can affect someone's life, not just by communication. They portrayed the emotions that can go along with stuttering because of the neglect of help that King George VI gets and how he doesn't know how to handle his situation. Colin Firth's portrayal was very accurate to what someone who is suffering with a stutter would have experienced. His acting with the emotional side of the stutter allowed for the audience to see that the stutter is just the tip of the iceberg. The film does present a cliché by having people pity him because of the stutter, and end up having him fix his life problems to make

it a feel good movie, for the audience. The movie also showed that throughout his childhood, his father would consistently verbally abuse him to get him to speak clearly and fluidly, when in reality, most children, or adults, that deal with a stutter don't get verbally abused by their family. The takeaway message of this film is that even with a stutter, and a high position in society, the disability does not define who you are.

I am Sam and *The King's Speech* don't exactly compare to one another when addressing the disability, since they are addressing two different ones. Both movies do, however, address the emotional aspects that can come with having a disability, no matter the severity. They show the audience that the disabilities are just the tip of the iceberg and that there are other aspects of the disabilities that occur that no one typically talks about. Awareness is also brought to both disabilities, through the movies, which is a step in the right direction for the disability community. Hollywood needs to do more of these movies, with a lot of different issues, not just communication disorders, but they need to do it realistically so that they don't give people the wrong ideas, or opinions.