

PORTRAYAL OF LOSS AND SUFFERING IN LITERATURE AND ART- A REVIEW OF “LORENZO’S OIL”

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ABSTRACT

Cinema has always been a powerful means of cultural, social and educational propaganda and people seem to be more receptive to the audio-visual media than just audio or print. Thus, films or movies have become a very effective means of social dissemination of information. The films are a reflection of the society and their stories come from society itself. The stories of the films do not just come from the present situation of societies around the world, rather since the time societies have been in existence. They revolve around a variety of themes ranging from romance to thriller or from science fiction to serious documentaries. A very crucial genre of films which began during the era of the '70s communicated about the sufferings in human lives. The pivotal role in this genre was played by the films which revolved around the depiction of life-threatening diseases. This paper discusses the role and significance of cinema in unfolding the atrocities faced by the sufferers and how they handle it. The aim of this paper is to present the subject of suffering and death in contemporary cinema with the example of the film “Lorenzo’s oil”. The research not only explains how suffering is shown on the big screen, but also reveals the medical community's approach to patients in case of diagnosing and treating serious and rare diseases.

Keywords: Contemporary cinema, Suffering

INTRODUCTION

Humanity and suffering have been inextricably linked for centuries. Every day physical, emotional and mental suffering affects people. However, in today’s world there is no place for suffering. Man has to be strong, healthy and productive; this is the expectation of a consuming and commercial world.

There are new studies that attempt to solve the suffering of the individual or the whole society. Field of science – bioethics – is trying to answer many questions related to human experience hardship and examines the issue from the medical, social, political, legislative and religious side. The combination of all topics can give an answer as to how society tries to accept suffering and whether has the right to eliminate this issue with the help of modern medical technology. In the article, ‘Suffering, and the Promise of a World without Pain’ contained in the book *Suffering and Bioethics*, the author draws special attention to this problem.

The transformation in daily life and the more and more limited social contact due to the illness makes the person isolated and he loses the spirit of togetherness that the community usually offers. Furthermore, circumstances that cause the existential seclusion are, for example, when a patient is isolated when in need of support, or when he or she is treated impertinently or made invisible. Usually, people shun such patients due to apprehension or fright and alterations in one’s own body and mood lead to the thoughts of aloneness and unfamiliarity towards oneself.

SUBJECT OF SUFFERING IN LITERATURE AND ART

The subject of the diseases has been presented in literature and art for a very long time. There are many literary works that refer to the subject of illness and suffering, for example: *The Plague*, a novel by Albert Camus, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* written by Ken Kesey and many more. Elizabeth Powell mentions in her doctoral thesis that human suffering is one of the continuing themes of Western literature.

Literature, from the times immemorial, has depicted the torments and agony to which human beings are subjected. For example, Homer describes the challenges that his protagonist has to face in *The Odyssey* and William Shakespeare depicts the distress and uncertainty of his hero in *Hamlet*. Marquis de Sade expresses the sufferings of children who were victims in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and Charlotte Bronte exposes the irritation of a woman stressed against the restrictions of her society in *Jane Eyre*.

DEPICTION OF SUFFERING AND PAIN IN LORENZO’S OIL

Cinema has emerged to be a great means to reach out to the society and highlight the sufferings of the people. Mainstream films, as well as docu-dramas, both touched the concept of showing terminal illnesses and consequent illnesses that people go through. Some highly

critically acclaimed movies were such which revolved around the theme of human sufferings or similar themes.

Similar to the field of literature, around the era of 1970s, more and more movies were made which showed the protagonist suffering. The prime subject was mostly to draw the attention of people towards some uncommon diseases about which they were clueless about. Hence, a new genre evolved during this time.

An example of such a film is *Lorenzo's Oil* directed by George Miller. The film narrates the story of a very rare and incurable disease - Adrenoleukodystrophy coupled with the X-ALD chromosome. It would seem that this is a film like many on the screens of cinemas, but it is a unique film for several reasons. First, it was made in the early 1990s, when people began to wonder about the effectiveness of therapies used by medical teams in rare diseases. Secondly, the film, despite many difficult scenes, told the story of a sick boy named Lorenzo in a very accurate way, faithfully depicting both the disease itself and the speed at which it progresses, especially in the case of a few years old boy.

On the basis of the footage from the film, as well as the quotations from the dialogues, he shows an image of suffering and the slow passing away of the only child. But it is not a martyrological picture, rather, it is a presentation by the director and the main actors, played by Nick Nolte (Augusto) and Susan Sarandon (Michaela), of the whole spectrum of emotions they masterfully played in the less than a two-hour film.

The work tries to pay special attention to the wise and thoughtful fight for the health and life of the loved ones and the issue of medical authority, which in *Lorenzo's Oil* was for the first time so strongly challenged. The quoted reviews, which appeared after the premiere of the film in a number of well-known magazines, only confirm this.

The director masterfully conveyed the emotions that accompany the parents from the moment of diagnosis to the most difficult moments when one can expect the worst, but in a way that does not make the viewer feel uncomfortable looking at the suffering. Emotion and compassion are obvious, but the camera repeatedly shows Lorenzo not directly, but through the prism of the actions taken by the caretakers. The last reason why this film, appreciated at many film festivals, is hope. The struggle of parents for the life and health of their only beloved son, determines their actions. It causes them to decide on risky therapies, participation in scientific symposiums, which are to bring invaluable knowledge and ideas for fighting an incurable disease, and finally, independent search for a solution.

Many hours spent in the library, reading dozens of volumes of scientific studies in the fields of medicine and biochemistry give the desired effect – the oil, which is supposed to

stop the progress of the disease. This is one of the most important goals of this film- to give hope of finding effective therapy for those for whom there is no rescue.

Stubbornness and consistency in the actions of little Lorenzo's parents drives the film's action, but also raises new questions. Do we have the right to look for solutions on our own and expose patients to the undoubted risk of unverified therapies? How long do we have the right to prolong the suffering of patients? The movie also tries to highlight the new doubts in the field of bioethics, which apart from fighting for health also pose questions in the field of faith - *who decides about life or death? The doctors, medical authorities, caregivers, the patient himself or God?*

The adrenoleukodystrophy depicted in Lorenzo Oil is an extremely difficult disease, as it inevitably leads to death. Many studies that have been conducted on the oil discovered by Augusto and Michaela Odone (Lorenzo's parents), have provided information on the actual effectiveness of the product. We now know that the product can help to slow down the development of the disease in those patients who have no clear signs of brain damage.

So what about research and finding solutions on your own? The film shows that it is worth acting and never losing faith in the fact that finding a solution is possible. In the most difficult situations, action is what gives a person hope, a chance for health and survival.

CONCLUSION

The subject of suffering and death in literature, especially in contemporary cinema, is an extremely broad subject. This work outlines the directions of possible future research and reflections on the issues that concern humanity. It would be worthwhile to look more broadly at the social aspect, the taboo subject of death in literature and cinema, and the bioethical dimension of suffering as a dilemma between persistent treatment and the right to choose between life and death.

In the contemporary times, when the insensitivity among people is on a rise, it is the need of the hour to expose them to what the suffering is and how people endure pain. Also, on the other hand, if the film ends on a positive note (Lorenzo's oil), it gives hope to the people that the sufferings may end if handled bravely and with determination.

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