

# *The Boys Next Door*

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## **The Tears of Clowns: Comedy as a Dramatic Enhancement in *The Boys Next Door***

At the beginning of Act 2, scene 3 in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses the humorous element of comic relief in the form of a feisty porter to alleviate the oppressively serious weight of King Duncan's murder. Making allusions to equivocators, tailors who skimp on the fabric they use for the hose they make, and several amusing references to the effects of alcohol as an equivocator, the porter effectively causes the audience to temporarily forget the dark and cutthroat tone of the play and laugh at his wit. Such timely use of humor in an otherwise dramatic, depressing or serious work is appropriately known as comic relief.

Shakespeare was adept in his use of comic relief, often utilizing lowly characters to provoke humorous situations in the play (as well as humorous reactions from an audience). Characters such as these are in a great deal of his plays, be they comic or tragic in tone, and are often known as fools or clowns. Characters such as the porter in *Macbeth*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and the gravedigger in *Hamlet* comprise this lower class of people, much like the "trickster slave" in the drama of Plautus long before Shakespeare. Effusive and glib as they are, are often derided as silly and unimportant by most of the other characters. Despite the low opinion that may be held of them, they often end up saying some of the most profound things in the stories. They accentuate humor in the comedies, provide comic relief in the tragedies, and often are equated with the notion of the "wise fool," one who turns out knowing more about human nature than the presumably more educated main characters of the play.

The use of comedy in what would otherwise be serious works is a common feature of drama even today. This formula is employed in various movies and situation comedies as well as self-contained works of the stage. Examples abound, from the popular "Roseanne" television series to works such as *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley. One play that seems to touch

intriguingly on the use of comedy in a mostly serious story is *The Boys Next Door*, by Tom Griffin.

It is easy to compare this use of comedy to Shakespeare, because four of the main characters in the play suffer from either mental retardation or the mental illnesses of schizophrenia or obsessive-compulsive disorder. This disadvantage shared by these characters will, in the minds of many audience members, connect them almost instinctively to the idea of the fools in Shakespeare's plays. This connection exists in their having characteristics that necessarily keep them from doing many tasks that could be done by a normal person. In this sense they are stripped of some of their dignity from the outset as are the fools, who are usually considered lowly and undignified (often incorrectly) by the majority of characters in Shakespeare.

The stark difference between this comparison comes with the same disadvantage that may link them to the fools: mental retardation. Foolish and facetious as fools can be, they are also witty, sharp, and usually amply able to defend themselves and participate in a battle of wits. None of the mentally retarded characters in *The Boys Next Door* are able to do this, yet comedy is used in relation to them to enhance the dramatic aspects of the play.

In *The Boys Next Door*, the use of comedy in close proximity to Lucien, Norman, Arnold and Barry provokes an interesting comparison of them to Shakespeare's fools and clowns. In the sense that these men are clowns, comedy often occurs in direct relation to them because of their handicaps. In the sense that they are not, comedy is either used in jest of them or as a setup to enhance sad or poignant moments in the play—appropriately, in some cases, referred to as the tears of clowns.

Lucien Smith has one of the most powerful moments in the play, when he is momentarily elevated from an intellectually deficient mumbler to an articulate and intelligent speaker. Though the scene starts out amusing enough, with Lucien nervously fidgeting, talking about his Spider-Man tie and getting ready to speak to the congressman, Lucien's inability to communicate to him becomes increasingly more apparent as an obstacle and less funny in the resultant futility. The

scene, in short, seems to be stripping Lucien of his dignity. Even the Spider-Man tie comments lose their humor. Eventually Lucien closes down and is still for a long moment, and as the lights come up on him alone, he has an epiphany of sorts, and delivers an eloquent monologue about his plight as a mentally handicapped man. During this monologue the audience sees what he would like to say in real life, but can not because he lacks both the capacity and the boldness to do so.

Griffin's use of comedy in this scene is done with the intent of getting the audience interested in what Lucien is doing. With the amusing opening, the audience laughs at Lucien and is led into the rest of the scene fairly easily, where they begin to see that his mental condition causes more than just humorous situations. As his ability to communicate breaks down, there is a starkly different feel to the scene, particularly by the time of Lucien's epiphany. It gradually becomes more dramatic, frustrating, and eventually downright serious. This is a man whose speech skills are a serious problem and impede his ability to function in the world. This is a man who is "broken," and mystified by how many common objects work. No one deserves this. It is in this sense that the use of comedy makes an effective dramatic "one-two punch" and enriches the poignancy of Lucien's situation.

This is true with the character of Barry Klemper as well. His fantasy that he is a professional golfer provides a good deal of humor at the beginning of the show, particularly in his pretentious instruction of "clients" such as Mr. Hedges, whose name he can't even remember. While Barry believes he is a fantastic golfer, he is in fact unable to focus enough on the basics of the game to give his customer a very good lesson. Instead, he has a brief and humorous scene where frustrates Mr. Hedges with his inability to call him by his proper name: "Golf is more than hedges, Hodges. Golf is the little things. The basics. Execution. Execution. Execution."

Set against this comedic foil is a later scene in which Barry and his father, Mr. Klemper have an uncomfortable reunion after years of separation. Mr. Klemper, described as "a coarse middle-aged man" in the script, does most of the talking while they are together, and quickly gets frustrated when the now reclusive Barry is unable to respond to him. Only by striking out at his

son physically and verbally at is Mr. Klemper able to provoke the anguished plea from Barry: “No, Dad! No more, Dad! Please, Dad. No more... Don’t hit me anymore! Please, Dad...”

The difference in tone between these two scenes is all the more accentuated when one considers that it is Barry’s condition that causes most of the action—or inaction—for both. His schizophrenic pretension that he is a professional golfer, which makes for amusing exchange between him and Mr. Hedges, has created a rift through which he can not traverse to communicate with his estranged father. When seeing just how much this initially amusement-causing disorder impedes Barry’s ability to relate to someone to whom he should be close, it is easy to see the pain in Barry’s call to his father after he leaves: “Dad. Dad, I’m a golf pro now. Dad.”

To move to a more immediate juxtaposition of comedic and dramatic scenes, one needs only to look at a scene between Arnold and Jack that takes place near the end of Act I. At the start of the scene Arnold outlines an encounter he had with Helen, in which he asked her to dance and she replied, “You’re all wet.” Perceiving this comment as an insult, he retorted that she had a tic and caused her to hide from everyone else. When Jack arrives and points out to Arnold that he can’t go around insulting others, Arnold defends himself by telling Jack what Helen said. Jack points out that Arnold is indeed wet, and Arnold, again perceiving the allegation as an insult, proceeds to tell Jack that he also has a tic. Arnold’s inability to get Jack’s point about insulting others leads him to believe that Jack is insulting him, and this leads to a humorous response from Jack.

However, this response, coupled with Arnold’s telling Jack not to swear, prompts an explosive retort from Jack. “Don’t tell me what to do, Arnold! Okay!” the social worker rails at him. “Don’t tell me what to do, goddamn it! I’ve had it with all of you telling me what to do! I’ve had it with the whole god-damn bunch of you!” Arnold, who is stunned and hurt by Jack’s sudden ferocity, replies, “You’ve got behavior patterns that are not fun, Jack! Not, I repeat, one bit fun!” before walking away from him. The humor of the moment has been undercut by Jack’s

continually shortening temper, prompting a dramatic moment that is short, but saturated with tension.

This moment is a clear example of the “one-two punch” combination of comic and dramatic in that it shows the importance of their placement. When something comes out of the blue it seems to carry a power all its own that is not immediately obvious in comedic or dramatic build. By placing the drama so that it steps uncomfortably on the feet of the comedy, Griffin has more starkly emphasized the seriousness of that moment. It seems just as likely that any humor used to disrupt a potentially serious scene would be all the more accentuated and enhanced because of similar such placement.

Comedy does not, however, need to be compared against a purely dramatic moment for it to accent the poignancy of a situation. This is clearly shown with Norman’s later scene with Sheila, in which a humorous tone is maintained throughout the entire encounter, though the realization of Norman’s liking of Sheila is no less touching because of it. Their entire conversation is energetic, yet unfocused in most places, and the things about which they converse are certain to provoke laughter, from Sheila’s statement that her friend ate “a picture of... God and his friends eating” to Norman’s chagrin at the idea that he could have “broken” the flowers Sheila got him by sitting on them.

The present he gives her are keys, which she had unsuccessfully tried to get from him earlier. This gift is a humorous one, because the keys are of no particular value as a practical item: they open nothing vital and are of no monetary value. The fact that Sheila wants them is as amusing as the fact that Norman carries them around during the rest of the play. What is touching about them as a gift is that Norman seems to recognize that Sheila really wants them, and gets the help of his friends Lucien, Norman and Arnold to make a set of them for her. This amount of consideration on his part demonstrates a touching affection he feels for her, which both makes the moment funny and enhances its sentimentality.

The inclusion of comedy in dramatic or tragic theater (and vice versa) seems to indicate that, to most playwrights, life is a balance of happiness and sadness, of silliness and seriousness, and that only through exploring both do we, the denizens of “this mortal coil,” truly experience what it has to offer before we “shuffle off” of it. Comedy, as we have seen with *The Boys Next Door*, helps an audience to better see both the serious and the touching moments in a play. It is an effective foil that helps to lighten a somber mood, heighten the sentimentality of a tender moment, and enhance the poignancy of a dramatic moment. With his use of comedy, Tom Griffin has made *The Boys Next Door* a play that deserves to be known as a sentimental comedy that utilizes the tears of clowns.

**--Tony Goodwyn**

## Mental Illness in American Film and Theater

The American film industry has a tendency to take issues out of context and show unrealistic portrayals of important issues of the time. One such issue is mental illness. Hollywood has produced many films dealing with mental illness and retardation, however many of these films do not show the realistic aspects of this problem. For example, in the movie *12 Monkeys*, people with mental illnesses are portrayed as inhuman and incapable of having normal feelings and emotions. Also, the American film industry makes movies that deal with mental retardation in a way that makes the public believe that these people with mental illnesses are always taken care of and live without everyday concerns and problems. For instance, many of these films do not portray the mentally ill characters as having the same problems as normal people. It also seems as if Hollywood does not want to look at the possible mistreatment of the mentally ill.

However, there are exceptions to every rule. A film that takes a comical approach to mental illness is *The Dream Team*. This movie combines humor with the problems in the outside world that the characters must face. Films such as *Sling Blade* offer us an opportunity to see that people with mental handicaps are capable of normal human relationships and feelings.

Some films that deal with mental retardation and illnesses were originally plays. For instance, in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which was also a novel, we are given insight into the goings on in a mental institution and how they affect the lives of the mentally handicapped. This film captures the comical and tragic aspects of life through the eyes of a man living in this mental institution even though he is not mentally ill. Another film dealing with mental illness is *Charly*, a movie version of the play *Flowers for Algernon*, which was originally a novel. In this play we view the inner mind of a man with mental retardation.

All of these movies have touched us because of their use of realism. We are able to relate to the characters and learn from their experiences. The theater presents us with a feeling we cannot get with film. The live aspect of plays makes us empathize for the characters in the production as



well as sympathize with them in a way that cannot be achieved through movies. This live aspect cannot be matched in the movies. The theater has a way of pulling the audience in and holding their attention better than a film that a person can more easily walk away from or lose interest in.

The American Theater has produced a play that deals with the problems of mental illnesses in a way that has rarely been viewed. In the play *The Boys Next Door*, we are shown the trials and tribulations of mental retardation. We are given a realistic view of the everyday lives of individuals with mental illnesses. Although Hollywood has typically perceived mental illness to be unrealistic issue, we see the problems of these individuals in *The Boys Next Door* as everyday concerns, which are not any different that issues in a normal society.

There are examples of Hollywood portraying mentally ill people as being less than human. In the film *12 Monkeys*, Hollywood gives us a stereotypical portrayal of mental institutions and people with mental illnesses. The patients are shown walking around aimlessly talking to themselves. These people seem to be prisoners of society and are caged in like animals with no contact with the outside world. The main character in this movie is played by Brad Pitt, who makes a comment about this mental institution that he is in when he says, "This is a place for crazy people, and I'm not crazy." He also states that in the eyes of society you are mentally ill if you don't play by the rules and go along with the ideals of modern civilization. This part of the movie takes place in 1990, however patients are still being given drugs that make them incoherent and worsen their conditions. One would think that modern mental institutions would be more hospitable to patients, but patients are still put in straitjackets and given shock treatment.

Clearly, the American Film Industry does not want to portray the mentally handicapped in a realistic fashion. Hollywood also has a tendency to portray mentally ill people as villains, as in the case of *12 Monkeys*. Brad Pitt's character is a mentally ill person who somehow creates a way to destroy mankind. This movie deals with mental illness and retardation in an inhumane way, unfortunately it is not the only unrealistic portrayal of people with mental problems.

In the movie, *The Dream Team*, Hollywood gives us a glimpse into the actions of mentally ill men who are thrown into modern society. We are given a more comical view of mental illness that also touches on the realities of the lives of people with mental handicaps. The four main characters all have some mental problem, which separates them from the outside world. We are able to see how the families of people with mental illness deal with this problem. The turmoil that this illness causes for both the people with the sickness and their families is something that *The Dream Team* gives us an opportunity to see. We can sympathize with the characters because their problems are similar to one's we face in everyday life. These people need the same amount of love and attention that we all do and others thoughts and actions affect them just like anyone else. Although this is a comedy, it seems to view the characters in a realistic light, which is similar to *The Boys Next Door*. Both use comedy to show the realities of living with mental illness.

An exception to this rule of Hollywood oversimplifying and stereotyping mentally ill people is *Sling Blade*. This film has some of the same characteristics of *12 Monkeys*. It has the stereotypical all white mental institution with people walking around talking to themselves. This film however, portrays the main character as a more humane and sympathetic person dealing with a mental problem. Billy Bob Thorton plays the character of Carl Childers. Carl is a man who was put in a mental institution at an early age and was never able to grow up in a normal society because of actions he made as a child. Carl has relationships with normal people and is shown to have feelings, emotions, and morals just like anyone else. Carl is similar to many mentally ill people because he was viewed as being different and therefore, considered wrong and somehow retarded by the town's people

This film gives us a realistic view of the lives of people with mental illness because we are able to see that they are human and are capable of relationships and human feelings. Although Carl is slow, he can read and understands the bible. Many of the other characters in the film regard Carl as being "retarded" and use that as a scapegoat for their lack of knowledge or

understanding. It seems as if the world has a hard time understanding mental illnesses and has a tendency to ridicule people with mental problems without considering the person's feelings. This movie takes a realistic approach to explaining and showing the life of a person with a mental handicap.

This film is similar to *The Boys Next Door* because it has similar relationships and viewpoints. For instance, Carl has a relationship with Melinda, who is another mentally challenged person. This is similar to the relationship that Norman and Sheila have in *The Boys Next Door*. Also, we see the violent relationship between Carl and his father, which is similar to the relationship Barry has with his father. *Sling Blade* gives us a more accurate portrayal of people with mental illnesses than many of the other films that have tackled the subject. *The Boys Next Door* seems to give us even more insight into the daily lives and thoughts of mentally ill people in modern society.

Some films that deal with the issues of mental illness and retardation were originally produced as plays. One such film is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In this movie, mental illness is viewed in a way that was unique for the times. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* gives us a view of a mental institution that was not yet seen in 1975. In this film we see the goings on of a mental institution in the 1970's. Through the character of Randle Patrick McMurphy, played by Jack Nicholson, we are able to gain insight of what it would be like to live in a mental institution when you are not mentally ill. We see that these men in the mental hospital are normal people but are put in a situation that makes them live like animals. They are given shock treatment and forced to take drugs that keep them from expressing themselves.

These men are not given the opportunity to grow as human beings and be rehabilitated, which is the purpose of a mental hospital. Randle gives them the chance to become human by bringing in girls and taking them out into the real world to experience life the way it should be lived. The patients at the mental institution are shown to be capable of having normal relationships and feelings. They help us to understand how precious life is and how much we take

it for granted. This movie illustrates the importance of friendship in the lives of the mentally ill. Through McMurphy and the other patients, we see the importance of life and love in a place that Hollywood has perceived as impossible of such qualities.

The Indian in the film named Chief is portrayed as a gentle giant that remains quiet throughout most of the movie. We essentially see how normal and realistic his character is when he helps McMurphy escape. Chief is shown to have the capability and courage to share himself with the audience that makes us all see how little difference there is from the mentally ill and normal human beings. He helps us to realize that these people might not be so much mentally handicapped as they are misunderstood by society as a whole.

Another film that deals with mental illness in an interesting way is *Charly*. This film was originally a play based on the novel *Flowers for Algernon*. This movie was made in 1968 and starred Cliff Robertson as Charly, a mentally retarded man struggling to survive in the world. He tries to learn to read and write but his attempts prove worthless. His teacher takes him to a clinic where doctors have Charly chase a mouse named Algernon. The doctors then perform an experiment on Charly, which dramatically raises his intelligence. He eventually becomes a genius and after learning about the experiment, Charly becomes an emotional wreck because the experiment did not give him emotional maturity. This movie shows us no matter what our level of knowledge; we all have emotional and spiritual qualities that tie us together.

*Charly* was such a successful film because it also allowed us to relate to the trials and tribulations people with mental handicaps have in their life. This film is similar to *The Boys Next Door* because it allows the audience to relate to the characters and get involved with their lives in a way that cannot be done in most movies. Although some of the situations in *Charly* are hypothetical or impossible, we can still have sympathy for the characters and like we do in *The Boys Next Door*.

The theater provides us with something that we cannot possibly get from watching a movie. The emotional involvement and the sympathy and empathy we feel for the characters on

stage far exceeds that of a film. *The Boys Next Door* also takes realistic situations and believable characters to help the audience understand the everyday problems that people with mental illnesses have to endure. Although Hollywood has given us a stereotypical view of mental illness, the theater allows us to throw those stereotypes aside and focus on the real issues in today's society. People with mental handicaps are no different than normal people. They share the same need for love and attention that all people want to receive. *The Boys Next Door* shows us the relationships that are necessary to survive as human beings and those loving relationships are necessary for the emotional well-being of everyone. This play not only provides the audience with realistic characters in realistic situations; it allows us to become involved with these people in a way that cannot be done by Hollywood and in the movies.

Hollywood has produced many movies dealing with mental retardation and illness that fill our stereotype of people with mental handicaps such as *12 Monkeys* and *The Dream Team*. Although these films may be pleasing to the eye and perhaps give the audience something to think about, they do not stimulate emotion. Of course there are exceptions to every rule, such as *Sling Blade* and some other films that deal with this issue in a realistic way. Many of the films about mental illness that have been produced from plays are the most memorable because they stimulated our emotion and allowed us to become involved with the characters in a way that other films cannot. It is possible that these plays such as *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Charly* are so powerful because they were originally performed on stage.

**--Brian Confer**

## **Mental Illness: How Much Do you Really Know?**

Many people have heard the terms schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive, and retarded. But of those that have heard the terms, how many actually *know* what they are? Many times a person's knowledge of these illnesses stems only from what they have seen on TV or in a movie, or read in a fictitious book. As most of us know, movies, TV, and fictitious books are not always realistic, and therefore the depictions of these illnesses might not be accurate. Likewise, some people's knowledge might also be inaccurate.

*The Boys Next Door* is a play that deals with the subject of mental illness. Arnold, Barry, Lucien, and Norman are four grown men who live in a group home and are helped through life's tribulations by a social worker named Jack. In order to better understand these men and the problems they go through in their lives and throughout *The Boys Next Door*, it is imperative to know and understand the illnesses they possess. Arnold has obsessive-compulsive disorder, Barry is a schizophrenic, Norman has a moderate case of mental retardation, and Lucien has a severe to profound case of mental retardation.

Barry is a schizophrenic<sup>1</sup>. Contrary to popular belief, schizophrenia does not mean a person has "split personalities", nor is it caused by a bad upbringing or a broken home. Schizophrenia is an actual brain disorder which is very serious. It is a disease caused by physical damage, like cancer or heart disease. It makes it difficult for a person to decipher between real and unreal experiences, think logically, have normal emotional responses towards others, and behave normally in some social situations. This disease can also make it difficult for a person to behave appropriately, remember things, or even speak coherently. In addition to these difficulties, this disease, in the elevated forms, can make a person dysfunctional in society; disabling them to work or go to school.

Schizophrenia is one of the most common mental illnesses in the world and causes more hospitalizations than any other mental illness. Schizophrenia affects one percent of the world's population and 2.5 million people in the United States. The disease usually begins between the ages of 15 and 25, and is rarely seen before the age of 12. Men and women are equally susceptible to the disease, although it may appear later in women than in men.

The symptoms of schizophrenia usually fall into two categories: positive and negative. Positive symptoms include paranoia, auditory hallucinations, and bizarre behavior. Negative symptoms are lack of initiative and inability to relate to others, which usually results in the person with schizophrenia withdrawing from society.

#### **POSITIVE SYMPTOMS:**

- *Disordered Thinking:* Thoughts “jump” between related and unrelated topics and can even be “blocked.” The person may talk nonsense, make up words, or replace them with sounds and rhymes.
- *Delusions:* False thoughts or beliefs that have no reality basis. For example: someone might assume they are a golf pro and start giving lessons to people as if they were in fact a pro.
- *Hallucinations:* Hearing, seeing, or feeling things that are not present. People with schizophrenia might hear voices that give them commands or comment on their behavior.

#### **NEGATIVE SYMPTOMS:**

- *Blunted (or flat) Affect:* Lacking awareness of other people's feelings. This person's face looks completely blank with no expression of emotion. This person does not respond normally to conversation, avoiding eye contact and making few movements and gestures. In severe cases, the person may become motionless (catatonia).
- *Avolition:* Lacking energy, spontaneity, and initiative.

- *Anhedonia*: Lacking pleasure or interest in activities that were at one time pleasurable to them.
- *Attention Deficit*: Difficulty in concentration.

Barry most obvious symptoms are the positive symptoms. He displays signs of both disordered thinking and delusions. His disordered thinking is recognizable when he jumps from one topic to another, and they do not appear to be connected in any manner. His most obvious symptom is his delusion that he is a golf pro. He is obviously not, but he thinks that he is, and no one will change his mind.

Medical professionals still do not know the causes of schizophrenia, but there have been some significant discoveries in the past few years that are opening the doors to determining a cause. In recent studies of the brains of schizophrenic people doctors have noticed enlarged fluid-filled ventricles and enlarged hippocampi. Doctors also speculate that a schizophrenic's brain might also produce too much or be extremely sensitive to dopamine, one of the brain's neurotransmitters that allow nerve cells to send messages.

Treating and curing schizophrenia is difficult because doctors do not know the exact cause yet. In general though, there is a "Rule of Thirds." This rule states that 1/3 of schizophrenics get well and return to a normal lifestyle, 1/3 have occasional reoccurring problems and have to spend some time in a mental hospital, but most of the time out. The last 1/3 have a serious illness due to some physical damage to the brain and spend their whole lives in a ward.

Barry would fall into the middle 1/3 of this rule. He is not independent enough to live in society normally by himself, but he is well enough that he does not need to live in the mental hospital. He does fine in the group home, until his father comes and upsets his equilibrium. Barry then has to go back to the ward until he becomes better, and then he will be able to go back out into society until his next relapse.

Treatment of schizophrenics is done with antipsychotic medication, rehabilitation and counseling. The antipsychotic medication helps reduce or eliminate the hallucinations and



delusions and can help the person with schizophrenia regain their grip on reality, which helps them return to society. The rehabilitation and counseling helps the people with schizophrenia learn to communicate with people and develop skills they need to live an ordinary life (cooking, personal hygiene, handling money, etc...).

Arnold has obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)<sup>ii</sup> which is the most common mental illness that we know of. It is estimated that between 2 and 3 percent of the entire population and 5 million people in the United States have or will experience symptoms of OCD at some point in their lives.

OCD is an anxiety disorder in which a person feels certain obsessions or compulsions, which they feel they are unable to control. Obsessions are generally defined as recurring unwanted thoughts or worries, and compulsions are activities or rituals that one must perform to relieve the anxiety brought on by obsessions. Contrary to popular belief a person inflicted with OCD does not always display both of these symptoms, although most of the time they do.

#### **TYPICAL OBSESSIONS:**

- Fear of contamination and dirt, germs, toxins, or poisons.
- Fear that one will be responsible for something terrible happening to oneself or others.
- Fear of having a serious illness
- Need for symmetry, order, or exactness.
- Aggressive or sexual thoughts that conflict with ones morals.
- Doubt, or excessive need for reassurance.
- Inability to get rid of useless or worn out possessions.

#### **TYPICAL COMPULSIONS:**

- Washing
- Cleaning
- Constant checking

- Touching, ordering, and arranging
- Asking for reassurance
- Hoarding

Arnold's obsessions would probably be fear of illness and need for constant reassurance. His compulsion is asking for constant reassurance. Throughout the play, he is constantly worried that he is going to get some disease or have to take antibiotics if he does a certain thing. He also relies on Jack and the other three to give him constant attention and reassurance that he is doing things properly. A good example of this is the incident with the rugs. Arnold needs people to recognize him and give him reassurance, so he gives them many opportunities to talk about the rug. When he fails after many attempts, he gets very upset and leaves.

There are several generally accepted subdivisions of OCD. Amongst them are Washers, Checkers, Cleaners, Hoarders, Repeaters, Orderers, and Pure Obsessives. Washers are people that generally have a fear of germs, dirt, or contamination from substances like bodily fluids, dirt, dust, bacteria, viruses, excretions, and things of similar nature. Compulsive washers can spend hours washing themselves, or certain parts of their bodies, trying to rid themselves of the "contamination". They may also avoid contact with things they think are "contaminated" for fear of becoming "contaminated" themselves. One of the most striking things about the spread of "contamination" is that in a washer's mind, this "contamination" can be spread from object to object without actual physical contact.

Cleaners are those people that feel that other things are contaminated or dirty, and spend many hours cleaning their surroundings. For instance, a cleaner might spend hours dusting their home, and then go back and start again as soon as they have finished, because dust has settled in the interim.

Checkers have a problem remembering or being sure that they have or have not done something, and therefore go back to check whether they have or have not done it. For instance, a

woman might turn off the stove, but be compelled to go back and check 20 times, or even 100 times to be sure that it is indeed turned off.

Hoarders collect things; anything and everything. These people usually like to collect everything they can, in case they will “need it again”. They have difficulties throwing anything away. They usually cannot even stand to throw away garbage, and often will let it just sit around them.

Repeaters are those who feel they have to do things a "right" number of times. They feel they have to do it the certain amount of times to protect them from some imagined danger, or prevent possible harm to themselves or a family member. Repeaters generally fear that if they do not do things the "right" number of times, something bad will happen, although some may just have to do things "just right" for no apparent reason.

Orderers have to have things organized absolutely "the right way". An orderer might be reluctant to let anyone touch their possessions, lest they be misarranged. Orderers can spend hours just aligning a piece of paper on a desktop, or straightening a bookshelf. If anyone has moved any of their possessions from their “right places” they instantly recognize it, and spend hours putting them in their “right places”.

The last subdivision of OCD is the Pure Obsessive, which is also the most difficult OCD to treat. These people suffer from obsessive thoughts of a generally disturbing nature. An example might be a person who constantly obsesses over whether they will hurt their child. Although they know they wouldn't, they can't stop worrying that they might.

The exact cause of OCD is still not known, however most researchers believe that it is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. One chemical attributed to causing OCD is serotonin, which is a chemical in the brain that acts as a messenger between nerve cells.

Other researchers link the disorder to an area of the brain above the eyes, called the orbital frontal cortex. They speculate that this area of the brain is overcompensating for another part of the brain that is lacking and this overactivity in turn causes anxiety and worrying.

Researchers have found another cause of OCD that occurs in young children. If a child has strep throat, they can obtain OCD from some of the medicine prescribed to cure them. Although researchers aren't exactly sure how it happens, they know that some forms of antibiotics that are used to treat strep throat react with the chemicals in the brains of some children, causing OCD.

Men and women are equally affected by OCD and report that the symptoms of OCD first arise in their childhood or during their teens. OCD usually starts out mildly and then increases in severity over time if not treated with medication. Most people follow a chronic waxing and waning course, which means that flare-ups of their symptoms followed by periods of reduced symptoms. The flare-ups usually occur during times of high stress.

There are treatments for OCD. The most common two are behavioral therapy and medication. There is also a possibility for neural surgery, but that is only for cases of severe OCD.

Behavioral therapy (BT) involves working with a trained therapist to understand, manage and control obsessions and compulsions. In BT the person with OCD is asked to face objects or thoughts that cause them anxiety. Then they are asked to refrain from acting out the usual behavior they exhibit at these thoughts. For example, a patient who fears touching a doorknob to a bathroom because they fear it is contaminated takes a step-by-step approach to touching the doorknob. In the beginning they may have their hand 2 feet from the door, but progressively they get their hand closer and closer to the doorknob until they are able to grab it.

This process, called exposure and response prevention, can result in reduces anxiety and has helped many people with OCD make rewarding progress in learning to manage their symptoms of OCD.

There are medications available to people with OCD, which is based on the concept that OCD is caused by an imbalance of serotonin. The medication is a class of drugs called

*selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors* (SSRI's), which is a drug that is commonly used to treat depression. However, researchers found that SSRI's also great reduce the symptoms of OCD.

Norman and Lucien are both mentally retarded, which is defined as "below-average general intellectual function with associated deficits in adaptive behavior." While it may not appear that Norman and Lucien have the same mental illness, due to the discrepancies in their behavior and mentality, their illnesses differ only in the severity.

Mental Retardation (MR)<sup>iii</sup> is generally categorized in four sections:

- **Mild - I.Q. between 50-75** – Able to live and work independently.
- **Moderate - I.Q. between 30-50** - can often achieve supported (coached) employment and live with limited assistance
- **Severe - I.Q. between 20-30** - can sometimes achieve supported employment; more typically they can function at the level of sheltered employment. Generally require significant assistance for living.
- **Profound - I.Q. 20 or below** - can sometimes achieve supported employment; more typically they can function at the level of sheltered employment. Generally require significant assistance for living.

Norman would be considered in the moderate range of MR, as he is still able to function in the society with some help. Lucien on the other hand would be between severe and profound. He is not able to speak coherently nor can he function in society without a lot of help from someone, in this case, Jack.

There are numerous causes of MR, but only 25% of the causes can be determined. While only a ¼ of these causes can be determined, there are many categories that describe the 25% of known causes of MR:

*Unexplained:*

This category is the largest and a catchall for undiagnosed incidences of mental retardation.

*Trauma:* (prenatal and postnatal)

- Intracranial Hemorrhage: before or after birth (for example, periventricular hemorrhage)
- Hypoxic Injury: before or after birth (for example, that associated with cerebral palsy)
- Severe head injury

*Infectious:* (congenital and postnatal)

- Congenital Rubella
- Meningitis
- Congenital CMV
- Encephalitis
- Congenital Toxoplasmosis
- Listeriosis
- HIV Infections

*Chromosomal Abnormalities*

- Errors of chromosome numbers (Down's Syndrome, and so on)
- Defects in the chromosome (fragile X syndrome)
- Chromosomal translocations (a gene is located in an unusual spot on a chromosome, or location on a different chromosome than usual)
- Klinefelter's Syndrome
- Prader-Willi syndrome
- Cri du chat syndrome

*Genetic Abnormalities and Inherited Metabolic Disorders*

- Galactosemia
- Tay-Sachs Disease
- Phenylketonuria
- Hunter syndrome
- Hurler syndrome
- Sanfilippo syndrome
- Metachromatic leukodystrophy

- Adrenoleukodystrophy
- Lesch-Nyhan's syndrome
- Rett's Disorder
- Tuberous Sclerosis

*Metabolic*

- Reye's Syndrome
- Hyponatremic Dehydration
- Congenital Hypothyroid
- Hypoglycemia (poorly regulated diabetes mellitus)

*Toxic*

- Intrauterine: exposure to alcohol, cocaine, amphetamines, and other drugs
- Methylmercury poisoning
- Lead poisoning

*Nutritional*

- Kwashiorkor
- Marasmus
- Malnutrition

*Environmental*

- Poverty
- Low Socioeconomic Status

MR is considered a cognitive disability, which describes the brain's inability to process, retrieve, store and manipulate information. This inability usually manifests itself in impairments to attention, orientation and memory. Cognitive disability includes deficits in such tasks as problem solving, judgement, information processing (reading, writing, mathematics) and behavior.

Symptoms of MR include failure to adapt normally and grow intellectually. Although this may become apparent early in life, in the case of mild retardation, it may not become

recognizable until school age or later. Other signs of MR include slowly developing motor skills, language skills, and self-help skills of a child compared to the rate of the child's peers.

At the present time there has not been a cure found for MR. This could be partly due to the fact that researchers are still unable to determine %75 of the causes of MR. While there are no cures yet, there are treatments that can help individuals with MR become more independent. The primary goal of treatment is to develop the person's potential to the fullest through special education and training. Treatment includes learning social skills, which help a person function as normally as possible in society and may begin as early as infancy.

There is a company in China that boasts they have found another treatment for MR: Acupuncture. Here is an abstract of an article they printed in the 1995 *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, "128 children of mental retardation were diagnosed in accordance with the diagnostic standards proposed by WHO in 1985. The patients were treated compositely with acupuncture, auriculo-acupoint pellet pressure and herbal plasters on acupoints, bringing about improved mental developments in intelligence quotient (IQ) and social adaptation behavior (SAB), as evidenced by recognized intelligence tests for children."

We have now seen the symptoms and causes of these mental illnesses and how these men are affected during the play, but what will their lives be like after the play; in the future? It is highly likely that all four men will remain the same. Their conditions will probably never change unless something drastic happens, or there is some new cure that is found.

Arnold's obsessions might become less serious if he undergoes the behavioral therapy. Other than a decrease in these obsessions, Arnold's behavior will not likely change very much. He will probably never be able to live on his own in the society though. Barry will probably spend the rest of his life in and out of the mental institutions. He is in that middle 1/3, and will never be able to completely be independent, but if he keeps taking his medicine he should be able to participate in the society in a group home.



Lucien's condition will most likely never change. He will probably be the same as he is now, and will be dependent on someone forever. Norman will also remain the same. His condition will not worsen, and he could continue working in the doughnut shop if he wishes. If things work out between he and Sheila they could get married and have a family. If they had children, there is a large chance that their children could have normal intelligence.

*The Boys Next Door* is a play that depicts the hardships that people with mental illnesses experience every day. Although these conditions are not laughing, uses comedy to teach us what it is like to live with these illnesses. He educates us through laughter. And as we laugh, we learn a little about Norman, Barry, Arnold, Lucien, and the adversity they must endure.

--**Michael Shannon**

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<sup>i</sup> All material about Schizophrenia comes from NASRAD, Oltmanns and WNET.

<sup>ii</sup> Material for OCD comes from CBS and Rasmussen.

<sup>iii</sup> MR material is from DD Insight and HealthAnswers.

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