

The Cinematic Weaponization of Feminism and Mental Illness

The depiction of feminist traits being tied to mental illness specifically in films of the 1950s/1960s was a pivotal moment in Hollywood and mental health care in the US. During the 1940s mental illness became a popular cultural interest because of the events that were happening during World War II. According to Kretschmar, “European psychiatrists were fleeing their countries and coming to the US, where their ideas found a receptive American audience” (2007). “Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities” (American Psychiatric Association). Further, mental health issues rose as a public issue as a result of the numerous people impacted by World War II. “It was the recognition of a proportion of the population not suitable for army recruitment during the Second World War that spurred the setting up of the National Institute of Mental Health in the USA. The differences in the presentation of the psychological symptoms among the officers and the soldiers opened up new ways of understanding the psychiatric reactions to stress” (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). This popular cultural interest in mental illness ended up being reflected in numerous films that involved women and depicted mental illness. This can be seen in films such as *Lizzie* (1957) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). The depiction of feminist traits being tied to mental illness continued in the 21st century and can be seen in films such as *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016) and *Sucker Punch* (2011). The 1950s/1960s was an influential decade because some of the same tropes seen in these films are influential enough to be seen in films today thus illustrating their lasting impact. These four films explore how feminist traits are tied to mental illnesses and are being used as weapons against women. This is in order to try to get women to conform to the norms and stay within the box.

In order to understand the significance of films in the 1950s/1960s, it is important to address the historical context. After World War II numerous societal changes were happening as a result of war. These societal changes included an increase in mental health illnesses and women's roles were changing since the men were coming back from the war (Mulvey, 2019). Regarding the impact on mental health, "the heroes of World War Two were now building a prosperous post-war society... The fact that veterans' hospitals were full of men with serious mental health problems went undiscussed" (Mulvey, 2019).

It is enlightening to compare these four sets of films because of the historical events that were occurring during those times. The historical context influenced the depiction of events in these films. When *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass* were produced it was post World War II when mental health rose as a public issue. In the 21st century, the discussion surrounding mental health has increased compared to the discussions that were occurring in the 1950s/1960s. As a result, comparing *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass* to *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Sucker Punch* is fascinating, because of the historical differences regarding mental health. Further, the role of women during these periods is extremely different. In the 1950s/1960s, the role of women during this time was that of a dutiful wife after the men came back from fighting the war (Mulvey, 2019). However, in the 21st century, the societal expectations for women have shifted to encompass a variety of different roles that are more expansive than the societal mores for women during the mid-twentieth century. As a result, the way feminism is being tied to mental illness will be different in these four two films. Feminism is "...about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It's about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge, and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights. It's about leveling the playing field between genders and ensuring that diverse women and girls have

the same opportunities in life available to boys and men” (International Women’s Development Agency). Through these four films, the historical changes in the depiction of feminist traits being tied to mental illness will be depicted in different ways.

The first two films that will be discussed are *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass* as these were made during the Golden Age of Hollywood. *Lizzie* was produced in 1957 and directed by Hugo Haas and *Splendor in the Grass* was produced in 1961 and directed by Elia Kazan. *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass* share numerous similarities regarding the weaponization of feminism and how feminist traits are being tied to mental illness. Throughout these films, feminist characteristics such as independence and fighting against gender stereotypes are depicted and characterized as forms of mental illnesses. In the 1950s the perception of women was heavily shaped by pop culture. Even though women were entering and reentering the workforce after the end of World War II, “the ideal suburban housewife who cared for the home and children” still appeared in women’s magazines, television, and films (Women in the 1950s). In the 1960s the perception of women continued to be heavily shaped by pop culture. At the beginning of the 1960s, “women were portrayed on television and in advertisements as happy homemakers, secretaries, teachers, and nurses. Women who did not get married were depicted as unattractive, unfortunate spinsters, and those who asserted themselves were dismissed as nagging shrews. Women were to strive for beauty, elegance, marriage, children, and a well-run home” (Schulman). *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass* emphasize the importance of women following the previously mentioned characteristics. Within these two films, the main female characters are described as mentally unstable because they are not acting “proper” since they are not following the traditional characteristics of women that were outlined in pop culture during the 1950s and 1960s.

Lizzie focuses on a psychiatrist treating a young woman who has three personality types: Elizabeth, Lizzie, and Beth. In *Lizzie*, there are three different personality types. First is Elizabeth, who is described as neurotic and unwilling to get help even though she knows something is wrong. Second is Lizzie who is described as sexually promiscuous and makes it known that she wants to be the only personality type. The third personality type is Beth who is described as charming and who the psychiatrist wants to be the only personality type.

It is not a coincidence that the psychiatrist believes Beth is the preferred personality type, even though she was the last one to emerge. Beth follows societal norms and is the picture-perfect definition of being a woman prescribed by the cultural norms of the period. Even though employment rates rose for women during the 1950s, "...the media tended to focus on a woman's role in the home. If a woman wasn't engaged or married by her early twenties, she was in danger of becoming an old maid" (Mrs. America: Women's roles in the 1950s). Based on the sessions with Dr. Wright, it is clear that he believed Beth is the persona that would most be able to follow the stereotypical definition of what it means to be a woman during this era. During one of the sessions with Elizabeth, Dr. Wright stated "Beth is a wonderful person. The person you were meant to be." As a result, *Lizzie* promotes the idea of feminist traits being tied to mental illnesses because the ideal personality type is Beth who is submissive and the ideal housewife for that era. The other two personality types are described as deviant because they go against societal norms and the characteristics of both of them are over heightened. The plot throughout this movie reveals that Beth is the only personality type worth keeping around.

The trope of the male psychiatrist juxtaposed against the female patient reinforces that the male voice prescribes what is socially acceptable for females. Phyllis Chesler in *Woman and Madness* discusses this concept and how psychiatry is a male-dominated profession. According

to Chesler, not only is the doctor more than likely male but the actual institution enforces patriarchal norms (Chesler, 1957). These opinions are based on patriarchal standards of what it means to be healthy and “normal” as a woman. In the context of the film, Elizabeth was told that she was sick or improving based on the opinions of a male doctor. For example, when Dr. Wright found Beth, he stated, “under hypnosis, I found a third personality. A normal lovely girl. She refers to herself as Beth... I have to develop Beth.” A second example that was previously stated was when Doctor Wright explicitly told Elizabeth that Beth is the person she was supposed to be. A third example is whenever Doctor Wright engaged in a conversation with Lizzie, he would not entertain her threats and instead would put her to sleep. These examples clearly illustrate that she was doing better or worse depending on the personality type that Doctor Wright had to engage with because he encouraged Beth to become the main personality and had a negative reaction toward Lizzie and Elizabeth.

However, *Lizzie* does acknowledge that mental illness is a real issue, and that childhood trauma can result in real consequences. Near the end of the film, Doctor Wright, Aunt Morgan, and a neighbor had a birthday celebration for Beth. While she was blowing out her birthday candles Elizabeth finally confronted her childhood trauma and acknowledged two crucial things that led to the development of her multi-personality disorder. The first thing she acknowledged was that she thought she killed her mother when in reality her mother just had a bad heart. The second thing she acknowledged was that she was sexually assaulted by Robin, her mother’s boyfriend. During this scene, the psychiatrist Doctor Wright acknowledged that Elizabeth was traumatized by the event and stated that “illnesses of the mind are just as real as the illnesses of the body.” As a result, *Lizzie* illustrates that women who suffer mental illness are going through something real and painful and should be treated seriously and acknowledged. Even though this

concept is extremely progressive for the 1950s, overall the film promotes traditional gender stereotypes about women and how there is a correct way for women to behave. The film promotes traditional gender stereotypes for the 1950s because Doctor Wright and the film as a whole portray the other two personalities as not being socially acceptable. Instead, the plot of the movie shows a preference for Beth because she is not sexually promiscuous, neurotic, or mean. Beth is portrayed as a sweet and innocent girl who fits the stereotypes of women in the 1950s that were previously stated.

Splendor in the Grass focuses on a similar narrative as *Lizzie* regarding the depiction of feminist traits as mental illnesses, because the main heroine Wilma Dean is expected to conform to the same societal norms as Beth. *Splendor in the Grass* focuses on two high school sweethearts, Wilma Dean and Bud, as they try to navigate feelings of sexual repression, love, and heartbreak. Wilma Dean follows societal norms and is a dutiful girlfriend to her boyfriend Bud. However, she starts becoming mentally unstable when Bud breaks up, and while navigating the loss of a relationship she starts to spiral. Further, Wilma Dean starts acting like Ginny (Bud's sister) who is extremely sexually promiscuous and breaks all of the societal norms. Wilma Dean becomes mentally unstable because she no longer has a guy in her life telling her what to do and gains a new sense of independence.

As a result of this new sense of independence, Wilma Dean took sedatives during the breakup and cut her hair. In one scene Wilma Dean shouted at Bud that she no longer had any pride after the breakup and that she wanted to die. It is extremely important to note that Wilma Dean did try to commit suicide after she got assaulted after a school dance. Wilma Dean had been asked to the school dance by Toots. At the school dance, Wilma Dean flirted with Toots and after an emotional breakdown started kissing him. Toots then drove to a waterfall clearing

and assaults Wilma Dean while she actively tried to get away and shouted no. However, the film did not depict Wilma Dean as being a victim. Instead, the film showed that because Wilma Dean consented to her assaulter's action at first, it was her fault that she got assaulted. Further, the film did not portray Toots in a negative light. Instead after the assault, the film focused on the mental instability of Wilma Dean and how she tried to swim off the edge of the waterfall. The film never brought up the assault again and instead the blame is placed on Bud for making Wilma Dean spiral. This ties into the weaponization of feminism and feminist values being linked to mental illness, because instead of acknowledging the negative implications of sexual assault, the film focused on Wilma Dean spiraling because she was no longer in a relationship.

Splendor in the Grass portrays feminist traits being tied to mental illness because it illustrates that a woman needs a man in their life and negatively characterizes sexual promiscuity. When Wilma Dean was dating Bud, she was characterized in an extremely positive light, but after she started to "stray" from traditional ideals it is clear that the film is characterizing her in an extremely negative light because they depict her as being chaotic and mentally unstable. At the beginning of the film, Wilma Dean was following the traditional ideals for women in the 1960s. She was striving "...for beauty, elegance, marriage, children, and a well-run home." Wilma Dean was a dutiful girlfriend who constantly supported Bud and envisioned a future together with him. Further, when Bud broke up with Wilma Dean her mother was worried that she had been "spoiled," in other words that they had sex. This shows that Wilma Dean constantly did what was told of her and it was unlike her to stray from traditional gender norms. However, after the breakup, Wilma Dean was no longer viewed or depicted with such high regard. For example, during the school dance where Wilma Dean went with a man named Toots, she is negatively depicted because of her clothing. When Wilma Dean got picked up by Toots,

she was wearing an extremely vibrant red dress and was rolling down her pantyhose. During this scene, the Director, Elia Kazan, did a really good job portraying Wilma Dean in a negative light, because she made Wilma Dean look unsophisticated. Elia Kazan did not want Wilma Dean to receive sympathy and instead wanted people to be frustrated with how she carried herself.

Further, the ending reinforced the idea that Wilma Dean spiraled and became mentally unstable because she did not have a man in her life. When Wilma Dean got released from the mental institution her parents had her friends at home so they could hang out and talk. One thing important to note is that her mom strongly encouraged her friends to not discuss Bud. However, Wilma Dean was adamant and wanted to see Bud, so her friends took her to visit him. While she was talking to Bud, it is clear that she was still in love with him. Further during a conversation between Wilma Dean and Bud, they talked about how the concept of happiness is not something that either of them thinks about as much. This ending profoundly impacted the overarching idea that feminist ideals are linked to mental illness. Even though Wilma Dean got mental help and was labeled sane enough to leave the mental institution, she still was not okay because she no longer had Bud in her life. This ending illustrates the film conflating feminism with mental illness because as a result of the life events Wilma Dean went through, she no longer thought about happiness and just seemed to be in a state of existence.

Lizzie and *Splendor in the Grass* are important films to discuss because as previously stated the 1950s and 1960s was a pivotal moment in Hollywood. Some of the same tropes seen in these films are influential enough to be seen in films today thus illustrating their lasting impact. This includes films such as *Alice Through the Looking Glass* which was directed by James Bobin and produced in 2016 and *Sucker Punch* which was directed by Zack Snyder and produced in 2011. In both of these mid-twentieth century films, the connection between the weaponization of

feminism and mental illness was discussed because the female characters went against the norms of societies. For example, both heroines (Alice and Baby Doll) were sent to the asylum by male characters. Alice was sent to the asylum because she was caught crawling over furniture and the psychiatrist claimed that she was exhibiting characteristics similar to female hysteria. Babydoll was sent to the asylum because she accidentally killed her sister when she was trying to defend her from their abusive father. Babydoll's dad also paid an employee of the asylum to make sure Baby Doll got a lobotomy so she could not talk to the authorities. A second example is that both Alice and Babydoll are characterized as mentally unstable because they do not confine to traditional gender roles. Alice is an eccentric girl who is determined to forge her path but is labeled insane because she does not want to be a mother or a wife. Babydoll is a strong independent woman who protected her sister from her abusive dad but is labeled insane because the dad does not want to deal with his actions or face any consequences. Through these two examples, it is clear to see feminist traits being linked to mental illness because Alice and Babydoll are labeled as mentally unstable because they go against societal norms of society. However, it is important to note that both films try to shift this perspective and promote some aspects of feminist ideals. *Alice Through the Looking Glass* is arguably more effective at doing so than *Sucker Punch*, but both films fall short and continue to uphold the problematic depiction of feminist traits being tied to mental illness.

Alice Through the Looking Glass focuses on a young girl named Alice who is trying to help her friend the Mad Hatter because he believes that his family is still alive and asked Alice to help him find them. The main theme of this film was that the label of being mentally unstable should not be used just because someone is different. Even the Queen of Hearts who was the villain in the story is provided a redemption arc because the audience can see why she acted the

way that she did. Further, the film highlighted how being a strong and independent female is not crazy. This can be easily seen through the characterization of Alice and the interactions between her and Hamish. First, Alice is the only human character that wears over the top and/or extremely unique outfits. For example, there is one scene where there is a party occurring and everyone was wearing suits and ball gowns. Alice on the other hand wore an extremely intricate outfit that she found during one of her many travels. However, everyone at the party taunted her and referred to her as a freak, circus clown, etc. for wearing a dress outside of the norm, which in this case would be a ball gown. Even though other people in the film looked at her differently, Alice wore them with such confidence that it was not depicted as a bad thing. Second, Hamish believed that Alice was crazy because she wanted to go on adventures and did not want to marry him in *Alice in Wonderland*. Hamish also made the argument that men are mentally superior to women. Throughout the film, Hamish frequently used the label of mad and crazy to delegitimize Alice and make her seem incompetent. For example, when Alice was talking to Hamish and the board about getting more funding for another expedition, Hamish says no and instead offered her a position as a female clerk. He told Alice that this was a great opportunity because no other shipping companies wanted to hire female clerks and that there was no way she would be hired as a ship captain. However, Alice rose above the comments Hamish made and was able to “win” at the end of the film. Instead of having to sell her dad’s ship to Hamish, she was able to keep the ship and fund her voyages, without needing money from someone else.

However, even though *Alice Through the Looking Glass* shifts the narrative regarding mental illness, there is a “perfect” type of crazy that is promoted. In the film, the heroine, Alice, and the villain, the Queen of Hearts, are both described as crazy. However, Alice is depicted as the proper way to be crazy because her traits are viewed in a positive light. Even though the

Queen of Hearts shares similar traits they are viewed in a negative light. For example, Alice and the Queen of Hearts have numerous ideas that are usually outside the box. Alice's ideas are viewed positively because she is trying to help the Mad Hatter. However, the Queen of Hearts' ideas are viewed negatively because she is trying to help herself. This illustrates that to be the "proper" type of crazy, you have to internalize some aspects of traditional female behavior. The only difference between Alice and the Queen of Hearts is intent, so it is not a coincidence that Alice who cares for other people (a traditionally feminine trait) is described as the hero of the story compared to the Queen of Hearts who is selfish and is the villain.

Sucker Punch focuses on a young woman named Babydoll who is locked up in a mental asylum. Throughout the film, Babydoll retreated to a fantasy world wherever her mind would take her. At first glance, *Sucker Punch* also seems to be shifting the narrative of mental health and feminism, because the female characters go on action-packed adventures. However, once you take a deeper look, it is clear that this film promotes the weaponization of feminism and how feminist values are tied to mental illness. Unlike *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, which is trying to normalize mental illness, *Sucker Punch* romanticizes and sexualizes mental illness. This can be seen in the hyper-sexualization of the female characters throughout the film. Throughout the fantasy scenes, Babydoll danced to put men into trances in order to steal something from them, and the dancing is characterized by a bunch of sexual noises and movements. According to Mizock and Kaschak, "one way women with serious mental illness differ from their male counterparts is with regard to gender oppression" (2015, p. 9). This is present in *Sucker Punch* because of the hyper-sexualization of the female characters that occur. Babydoll's mental illness was negatively impacted in both reality and the fantasy realm because her mental illness was

never addressed. The only time the film acknowledged that Babydoll is in a mental asylum is at the very beginning of the film and the very end of the film.

Sucker Punch also has a reoccurring theme of female independence, which seems to be promoting a new narrative but is still problematic. When focusing solely on the female rebellion the film is ignoring the implications of mental illness and the help that someone might need. In *The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness*, Donaldson expands on this idea of madness and the female rebellion. “Indeed, one could argue, when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, mental illness itself is erased” (2002, p. 102). For example, there are times when a woman is described as an extreme feminist when she performs certain actions such as Babydoll in the fantasy realm. For example, in one of the fantasy realms, Babydoll was a fighter and used multiple guns throughout the film. However, there are times when an individual needs help which is Babydoll in reality. As a result, the female rebellion and mental illness cannot be perceived as the same entity, or else you fail to see the whole picture. Further, throughout the film (in reality and the fantasy realm) Babydoll never lost her moral compass. Even though in the fantasy realm Babydoll was smart and willing to sacrifice herself for another individual, it is still important to acknowledge that this is what Babydoll wished she could do. In reality, Babydoll was trapped within the confines of the institution. This delegitimizes Babydoll’s sacrifice because it was not something actually occurring. Instead, it can just be brushed aside as a part of her dissociative personality disorder.

In conclusion, cinematic representations of mental illness have evolved in their depiction of feminism and mental illness, but the negative perception of feminism still occurs. In *Lizzie* and *Splendor in the Grass*, feminism is linked to mental illness because women were going against the norms of society. This same concept still applies to *Alice Through the Looking Glass*

and *Sucker Punch*, because women are still expected to act a certain way. Even though films in the 21st century are trying to shift the narrative they are only slightly successful because the negative narrative is continuing to be promoted. Instead of allowing women to be feminists, the narrative that is being promoted is that there is a right way to be independent. For example, in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the right way for women to be independent is by caring about other people and at times ignoring their self-interests. In *Sucker Punch*, the right way for women to be independent is by having a sexual edge and not acknowledging underlying issues. It is interesting to compare these four sets of films because it shows how there has been growth throughout the years regarding the depiction of feminism, but it also shows that feminism is still likely to be linked to mental illness.

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