

Connect Corner: Papageno Effect in Media: Fails and Triumphs

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When the movie *All the Bright Places* (2020)¹ (based on Jennifer Niven's 2015 book of the same name) opened with a young man convincing a young woman to step down from the side of a bridge, effectively halting her suicide attempt, I had hoped that this would be the modern-day Papageno effect storyline that we all have been waiting for, but unfortunately, it was not. Papageno, a character in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, contemplated suicide when he realized that he had lost his love. Three spirits remind him of alternatives, and he does not die by suicide. The perpetuation of similar storylines is thought to be suicide-protective.² While Violet Markey from *All the Bright Places* was offered the nonsuicidal alternative to dealing with the anniversary of her sister's death and birthday (engaging in a friendship/romance with classmate Theodore Finch), in the end there is no such alternative for Finch as he deals with complex psychological sequelae from abuse in early childhood.

Theodore has a tendency to dissociate during violent outbursts due to his childhood trauma and gets into a fight with a classmate at school. Confused and traumatized himself, he skips town (something he was known to do after such an episode). When Violet finds Theodore's clothes next to the lake where they had once gone swimming, the audience painfully waits for him to emerge from the water gasping for air. But such a scene never comes, and it is made apparent that he has died by suicide. What could have been a double Papageno effect—if Theodore was offered an alternative to suicide in addition to Violet—ended as yet another dramatization of teen suicide. The method (drowning) was foreshadowed throughout the movie as Theodore and Violet exchanged Virginia Woolf quotes (who died in 1941 by drowning herself). This foreshadowing further glorifies drowning oneself by pointing it out as the method used by a historical figure. Theodore, who copied the method

of Virginia Woolf, may serve as the Virginia Woolf to modern day teens watching this film and may further perpetuate copycat suicides by drowning. The WHO guidelines for media producers dissuades them from including an explicit description of the method used because of the potential to promote copycat suicides.³

The film's contrast of Violet and Theodore's hardships may lead the youth audience to draw inferences about what types of adversity end in suicide which has its own set of potential downstream effects. Youth who have endured physical abuse themselves may watch this film and think that they are destined to a similar fate. In the construct of media as a "super peer," those looking to Theodore as such may become disheartened by his eventual suicide. Just as media acts as a super peer for drugs and alcohol (normalizing them),⁴ media can do the same for suicide. The WHO guidelines for media professionals also dissuades them from normalizing suicide or presenting suicide as a solution to problems. This movie added to the list of teen dramas about suicide, a list whose magnitude normalizes suicide in itself. Even though Theodore's suicide was not explicitly portrayed, the method used is clear and could easily lead to copycat behavior.

There are, however, some films that do get the Papageno effect right. *Ordinary People*⁵ is a film about an Illinois family (Beth and Calvin, parents to Buck and Conrad) in the aftermath of Conrad's psychiatric hospitalization which was preceded by Buck's death in a sailing accident. Conrad was with Buck at the time of his passing and suffers survivor's guilt for holding on to the broken boat, when his brother could not. The plot of *Ordinary People* mirrors the plot of *All the Bright Places* in some ways. For example, Violet and Conrad both lost their only sibling in an accident. They also both have a friend involved in their Papageno story who

eventually dies by suicide. For Violet this is Theodore and for Conrad, it's his friend from the hospital, Karen. However, while Karen is a relatively undeveloped character in *Ordinary People*, Theodore is a main character in *All the Bright Places*. While it would be difficult for an audience member to identify with Karen because of her brief scene, Theodore is a well-developed character with whom youth could easily identify. Both movies also reveal the method of suicide/suicide attempt which, as mentioned previously, is not advisable due to the potential for the provocation of copycat suicides.

While there are clearly parts of *Ordinary People* that a child psychiatrist would recommend changing or cutting out, it still portrays a true Papageno effect story. Conrad's father Calvin is not perfect, but we do see him as a character who cares about his son and wants to help. A highlight of the film for me was when Calvin's face lights up when Conrad tells him that he has reached out to a psychiatrist to schedule an appointment. In fact, Conrad consistently demonstrated help-seeking behavior throughout the film. They show him reaching out to his friend Karen from the hospital, to his psychiatrist, and to his parents. When Conrad comes to a breaking point when he hears of the suicide of his friend Karen, he does not reattempt, but instead, he calls his psychiatrist, who offers him an urgent appointment. During that appointment, he comes to the realization that he has not forgiven himself for holding on to the boat when his brother had let go and he can now begin to try to forgive himself.

Furthermore, the ending is not perfect, but doesn't end in suicide. Calvin comes to the realization that he is not sure whether he loves his wife anymore after witnessing her callous disposition towards Conrad, culminating

in her inability to hug him back when he attempts to hug her. Throughout the film Conrad and his mother's relationship is portrayed as cold and awkward and it is revealed that she never visited him when he was hospitalized. After Calvin discloses his wavering affections for her, Beth moves away, and Calvin and Conrad are left to adjust to their new two-member family. The audience sees that life is filled with adversity and is far from perfect, but there are always ways to seek help. It portrays a nonsuicidal alternative to adversity/bad news as Conrad sought help from his psychiatrist and accepted support from his father. It shows that nonsuicidal options open up when they are sought out and that it may require seeking help from multiple different sources. It is imperative that movies with mental health or suicide content adhere to the existing guidelines to not cause harm or copycat behavior. In a time of mental health care shortages for youth, true Papageno stories in mainstream media would be a breath of fresh air and may even have suicide protective effects for viewers.

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