

Film Analysis of “Forrest Gump”

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“Mama said life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get” (Zemeckis, Finerman, Newirth, Starkey & Tisch, 1994). This iconic line can almost be recognized by all. Forrest Gump is the story of a mentally disabled man who lives through significant events occurring in America in his lifetime. Ableism being studied the least in psychological “-isms” is topic that should be addressed more socially (Hack, 2019). Forrest Gump exhibits instances of prejudice and discrimination to disabled characters.

A main theme in Forrest Gump is that disabled individuals can and do live normal lives as others but not without challenge. Forrest deals with his mental disability early on in the film and is discovered to have a very low IQ, but still is able to attend a normal elementary school. Also, early on in the film Forrest utilizes leg braces in order to straighten his spine. His physical and mental disabilities early on subject him to bullying by his peers. As Forrest grows older, he learns how to deal with disability and social situations. When he leaves his hometown, out of the comfort of his knowledgeable mother and loyal best friend Jenny, he experiences college and enlists in the Army. In the Army, Forrest meets another primary character Lieutenant Dan who in the war becomes an amputee of both legs. He deals with the neglect of society by harsh comments in the film because of his new status of being handicapped. After the war, the friendship of Forrest and Lt. Dan’s friendship grows, and they form a shrimping boat business in memory of Bubba; a fellow Vietnam soldier who died in combat. Forrest and Lt. Dan bond over the challenges of their disabilities and success of their business making them more financially fortunate than most. Lt. Dan is eventually fortunate enough to obtain prosthetic legs. Forrest eventually ends up with his longtime love Jenny before her untimely death, and then learns to adjust to a lifestyle of raising their abled son Forrest Jr.

Social stigmas are presented clearly along primary characters in *Forrest Gump*. Forrest has the stigma that he is stupid. Lt. Dan has the stigma of being crippled. Jenny although not shown in the film, dies from the stigmatized disease of AIDS. Blaine and Brenchley (2017) suggest “stigmatizing marks range in their visibility from the completely invisible...to the completely visible” (p. 210). Such as Forrest’s invisible mental disability to Lt. Dan’s visible amputations. The film also holds true to both media expressed stereotypes of “Tiny Tim” and “Supercrips” (Hack, 2019). Forrest starts life as a “Tim” with image of pity and sorrow for an unfortunate child who gets rocks thrown at him and gets continuous stares. However, soon develops into “supercrip” with success in collegiate football, national ping-pong, running and of course the infamous Bubba-Gump Shrimp Company. As far as coping strategies for Forrest’s constant interactions with others asking if he is “stupid” he often replies with strategic comments implemented by his mother, “stupid is as stupid does” (Zemeckis, et al., 1994). This assertive reply to his disability often results in casual continuation of conversation with others. These psychological aspects of the film can be seen as a whole in the representation of disabled persons.

One of the first aspects of the film that is defining for me is when Lt. Dan and Forrest are celebrating New Year’s Eve with women. While Forrest is not accustomed to sexual behavior, one of the women pursue him in which he denies it and the other woman asks the same question repeated throughout the film, “Are you stupid or something?” (Zemeckis, et al., 1994). Lt. Dan replies with passion not to ever call Forrest stupid and the women leave. It’s essential because Lt. Dan himself is at an uncertain stage of his life and has a hard time coping with his disability psychologically. Despite that, he immediately comes to the defense of Forrest. It is in this scene Forrest narrates the line, “He didn’t want to be called crippled just like I didn’t want to be called

stupid” (Zemeckis, et al., 1994). The idea that a stigma does not define them allows their future endeavors of success in the film. Another scene that is powerful is the scene in which Jenny denies Forrest’s proposal of marriage and he questions it and replies with “I’m not a smart man but I know what love is” (Zemeckis, et al., 1994). It goes against the spread effect concept that disabled people can’t fathom certain feelings and what they do is disregarded (Hack, 2019). Though the film has many moments in which it shines there are certain downfalls that I view as unnecessary.

An aspect of the film I felt was ineffective was Forrest’s running segment through the film. It is even questioned by others why he is running as to whether there’s a purpose or a meaning to it in which the answer is no. He says it’s just because he likes running. I don’t know if this was a theatric to his disability or what the purpose was, but I saw no deeper meaning. I also felt the issue of not addressing Jenny’s illness more descriptively was a shame. I know we could infer that Jenny’s virus was AIDS. In the time frame of the movie there wasn’t a way to be certain, but I wish it was actually definitive to raise awareness of AIDS and its effect in that point in the movie. As a whole, this movie gives a close to accurate model of experiences for those who live with disabilities.

This critically acclaimed film brings disabled awareness to light and encourages the idea that disabled individuals have different hardships but also success as others. Whether one is abled or disabled we must avoid stigmas and see people as a whole. Films give us the opportunity to look at others through another perspective and have an open-mindedness to their situations and struggles through life. When mama said life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get; can be applied to people you meet in life as well. Chocolate

comes in all different shapes and sizes and sometimes they have different fillings inside; just like people all have their individual looks with a personality inside.

References

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