

Split Between Worlds

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There is a large variety of movies that represent mental illnesses and disorders, such as amnesia, bipolar disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. It is an interesting genre to examine and elaborate upon, as there are so many different paths a director and screenwriter can take with each distinctive illness and/or disorder. More often than not, most of these movies are inspired by real-life cases of people throughout history, albeit a little dramatized for the viewer's excitement. A few films that represent some of these illnesses/disorders include, *Goodfellas* (intermittent explosive disorder), *Silver Linings Playbook* (bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder), and even *Finding Dory* (short-term memory loss, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and anxiety) and *Inside Out* (depression).

However, while these movies tackle the important discussions of these illnesses and disorders, as well as educating people about them, many of these disorders are ones that people are already quite familiar with, either by experience or previous knowledge of them. There is one particular type of mental illness/disorder that many movies don't typically delve into: the world of dissociative-identity disorder, also known as multiple personality disorder, but more commonly referred to as D.I.D. Not only is the disorder difficult to correctly portray, but there aren't very many cases that would make for the intensity and action that many people are interested in nowadays when they go to see a movie. Throughout this essay, I will be examining and discussing what D.I.D. really is, and how it plays into a particular movie adapted from the life of one specific man: Billy Milligan. Though there were a few identities that were over-embellished (more than likely for the purpose of creating inciting incidents), many of the

identities represented in the film were quite similar to their real-life counterparts; through comparing and contrasting Milligan's life to the movie, I will be investigating how the film not only portrayed Milligan and his identities and experiences, but how the film portrayed dissociative identity disorder in its whole, and what it meant for the population's knowledge of how the disorder works.

Dissociative Identity Disorder was first discovered in the 1800s, specifically around 1863. By definition from the American Psychiatric Association, "the essential feature of the dissociative disorders is a disruption in the usually integrated function of consciousness, memory, identity and perception" (Ringrose). The first man to be diagnosed with the disorder was Louis Vivet, when around age 17, after being paralyzed from the waist down after a shark attacked him, Vivet began acting differently after being sent to live in a psychiatric asylum. As the months progressed, Vivet became confused and angry at different times of the week, and even during different times of the day; more significant than that, he began to walk on his own. The nurses tasked with taking care of him found that "when paralyzed, Louis was calm and genteel, but when able to walk he was [quite rude], becoming a thief as well as being angry and confrontational" (Faraci). Louis also found that during the moments when he could walk on his own, he had no recollection of being confined to a wheelchair or being paralyzed at all; the same discoveries were made when Louis was limited to movement in his wheelchair.

Not only were the memories a loss in both aspects, but Louis's taste in things varied drastically from "standing Louis" to "wheelchair Louis". For example, "Louis loved wine and would regularly steal food from others" when he was able to walk, yet when he was completely paralyzed, "Louis had no interest in wine and would eat sparingly, often giving his food to other

patients” (Faraci). While Louis was the first person to experience the symptoms related to D.I.D., it would be quite a long time, almost into the 1900s, by the time doctors and psychologists really took an interest in this particular disorder.

Similar to the symptoms experienced by Louis Vivet, people diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder tend to lose their sense of time in between each identity/personality switch, have memory gaps due to their loss of time, and may even feel confused during and after the switches (Crichton-Stuart). “A person with dissociative identity disorder often has a ‘main personality’,” while the rest of the identities are referred to as “alters” (Crichton-Stuart). There have been a few instances when the “main personality” loses control of themselves for long periods of time; this is due to the “alters” taking control in order to protect the “main personality” from anymore traumatic experiences – while this might once have allowed the main personality to be free from their torments, the more control the alters take, the more their actions may be represented by negative consequences rather than positive ones. Many of these alters range in a variety of ages, some as young as 3-years-old (Millican); they may even take on the opposite gender from the “main personality” (Crichton-Stuart). As stated in Jo L. Ringrose’s book *Understanding and Treating Dissociative Identity Disorder (or Multiple Personality Disorder)*, many people that have D.I.D. “tend to have both attachment issues and repeated trauma, which is almost without exception sexual abuse; many are neglected in addition” (Ringrose). These alters that are created from these traumatic experiences are created by the brain in order to protect itself from further harm or damage. Once these personalities appear, it is very rare for them to disappear after the threat is no longer a liability to the main personality. These alters have created a home within the brain and body they are trying to protect, and just

like any another human being, they want to live and be seen and have their voice and opinions heard. The personalities are there to stay, and whether or not the main allows it, they have the ability to take control whenever they want to.

One of the most profound cases of dissociative identity disorder is within Billy Milligan. Milligan, born in 1955, suffered a traumatic, anxiety ridden childhood. The reason why Milligan is such an interesting case is for the specific reason that he was titled as the “first person in American Legal History to be acquitted of a crime based on his psychological condition” (Millican). On February 3rd, 1984, Milligan was taken to court for the robbery and rape of three young women. His lawyers fought for his freedom, as he was not actually the person who had committed the crimes; rather, it was two of his identities: Ragen Vadascovinich, “the ‘keeper of the hate’” and the one who had committed the robberies, and 19-year-old Adalana, who “cooks and cleans the house ... and writes poetry” (Millican). Both of the alters had committed their crimes without any of the other personalities knowing about it, including Milligan himself; however, according to Jerrold K. Footlick and Jon Lowell’s journal, *The Ten Faces of Billy*, it is possible that the call received by police about the crimes “might have come from one of Milligan’s ‘personalities’” (Footlick and Lowell). Though Milligan was not sentenced to jail time, he spent 10 years in Athens Mental Hospital, located in Ohio, to be treated for his disorder. After being released in 1988, Milligan spent the remainder of his life in a nursing home, where he died at the age of 59 (Millican). Though there were no other inciting incidents that would attract attention back to Milligan, his story was one that people would be interested in for quite a long time. Directors and writers alike were intrigued by his case, and the 24 vastly different

personalities he shared in one mind and one body. While many would try to replicate his story and reimagine his life, there were none quite as successful until 2016.

M. Night Shyamalan, director and producer of about 18 films, is an enthusiast of supernatural and psychological films. One of his most well-renowned films, and the one that this essay will be focusing on, is the movie *Split*. Made in 2016, *Split* is a thriller/psychological horror film about a man named Kevin Walter Crum, who is diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, and lives with 23 different personalities. As the movie progresses, the tension rises at an eerily steady pace as viewers learn that a 24th personality is slowly coming to life within Kevin's body; it is unclear when this personality will emerge, but as the identity is referred to by "The Beast", Shyamalan instills fear and anxiety within his audience members, as they are unsure when the identity will take over and what exactly it will do.

Right off the bat, the similarities between Kevin Walter Crum and Billy Milligan are easy to spot: both have 24 personalities (Kevin's 24th personality not yet fully developed), and both have specific personalities, or "alters", classified into individual groups. While Milligan separated his "alters" into "The Ten" and "The Undesirables" (Millican), Crum's identities were classified into one main group that was differentiated from the rest of the 17 personalities: The Horde. In *Split*, unlike Milligan's personal choice to group his identities into two separate sections, the "alters" in Crum's mind separate themselves. They have shut Crum off so deep into his own subconscious, that he is no longer in control of any part of his body. These "alters" have taken on such a big responsibility of taking care of Crum, that they have figured that shutting him out entirely from making his own decisions would be the best protection they could possibly provide for him. He is unable to "stand in the light," which is how the characters of Crum's

personalities refer to the way people are placed in charge of Crum's body. Crum's personalities have gained such a strength over him, that they are not only able to suppress the "main personality," but some of the personalities are able to entirely suppress each other as well. As I stated above, Crum has fallen victim to those with D.I.D. that have completely lost themselves within their own brains.

Another similarity presented between Kevin Walter Crum and Billy Milligan are the number of identities present within each person. Milligan had all 24 of his identities fully developed, while Crum's 24th identity is still gaining strength and power to overcome the rest of them as the movie progresses. While not nearly as brutal as the 24th identity depicted in *Split*, one of Milligan's identities was named Kevin, who was depicted as "the most vicious of The Undesirables" (Millican). Kevin was "a criminal planner [who] helped [Ragen] devise a plan to rob a drug store" (Millican); Ragen was a part of "The Ten", while Kevin was a part of "The Undesirables." It's interesting that they should work together to build up a robbery plan, but in all actuality, like Ms. Patricia, Hedwig, and Dennis's characters in the movie *Split*, it is quite possible that Ragen and Kevin were working together to complete a "bigger plan." The three characters listed above were the three "main" characters of Crum. After kidnapping three girls, viewers learn that the personalities have one goal in mind: to release "The Beast." Once he is released, he will feast on the "impure", "undesirable" girls they have kidnapped, and "The Beast" will be able to be the sole protector of Kevin. While the plotline here is far more brutal than the crimes Milligan's alters committed, the similarities between the two are still quite striking. Milligan's alter Adalana, kidnapped three girls and raped them, while in the movie

Split, Kevin's alter Dennis, kidnaps three girls and holds them hostage in an abandoned underground area of a zoo. Similar to Milligan's obliviousness of the crimes, Crum had no idea what was going on until the survivor to the three girls was able to forcefully pull him back into the light after "The Beast" had already committed heinous crimes. Here, Crum had been sheltered so far from himself that he thought he was still living through September 18th, 2014, when in reality, two years had passed during the time his alters took full control of his mind and body. While quite different from Milligan's experience, the two were both left in the dark of their alters' actions, and were quite horrified after finding out exactly what happened.

While it is unclear whether or not similar actions depicted in *Split* could be depicted within someone who has severe traumatic experiences, and therefore a severe case of dissociative identity disorder, Shyamalan was able to shed light on the disorder that is often overlooked by many people, including some doctors and psychologists. Though I'm sure his goal was to create a terrifying adaption of the disorder in its worst possible form, the idea of dissociative identity disorder was spread throughout people's minds, and questions were raised about the disorder. While some were still speculative, people began to become curious in how the disorder works, how it comes about in the first place, and what it might mean for those diagnosed with it. The idea that, perhaps, people with dissociative identity disorder might have unlocked an aspect of their brain that others are too "sheltered" to experience is both a fascinating and terrifying idea, one that might be further researched as the curiosity of the disorder grows and more people who have been diagnosed with it are not seen as abnormal or scary, but extraordinary and incredible.

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