

You Don't Become The Hero By Being Normal

“ParaNorman” is a stop motion animation produced by Laika Studios in 2012. Written and directed by Chris Butler, it has since become one of my favorite movies. In the film, Norman (the main character) is a child afflicted with the ability to see and speak to ghosts. He is often bullied for this and does not have many friends; even his parents worry about him and wish he was more ‘normal.’ One day, things get particularly weird as Norman begins to have visions. Though he tries to ignore them at first, it soon becomes apparent that it is due to a witch’s curse on his town, and it is his responsibility to put her to rest. Norman must prevent the witch from starting a zombie apocalypse with the help of a newfound friend, his older sister, her crush, and his bully. Though this film may seem childish to the untamed viewer’s eye, its story is profoundly mature and covers a wide range of essential topics. ParaNorman wonderfully succeeds in the portrayal of villains as ordinary people shaped by circumstance, which should not be overlooked just because it was initially created for children.

Often in children’s movies, the villain is bad because they are bad. For example, King Candy (“Wreck-it Ralph”), O’Hare (“The Lorax”), and Crider (“Barbie: Princess and the Popstar”), all films produced in 2012, the audience will find that the antagonist’s only motivation is greed and general evilness. “ParaNorman” turns that typical jargon on its head and creates a narrative where one can relate to all the characters, even the villains. When the viewers are first introduced to the Zombie court, they are shown as the enemy. The children fear these creatures, understandably as they are dead beings from the earth, and are soon chased by them. It is not until much later in the movie that the audience travels into the past where they see the horrible

acts committed by this group of undead and truly see the evil within them, but then comes a moment of pause. The zombie court acted out of fear. They made a rash and terrible decision, but they were uneducated and afraid and chose to act out of emotion instead of logic. Years later, these men and women regret their choices and don't want to wreak havoc amongst the community; they simply want to end the witch's curse and finally be put to rest. This is something that the majority of people can relate to. It is not going to be a life-changing decision, it can be as simple as lashing out at one you love, but people are so powered by emotion that they can forget to act appropriately.

The zombie court is not the only group of people to enact violence out of fear. The more significant part of the Blythe Hollow (the town Norman lives in) also behaves erratically. When the town first sees the zombies, they grab the nearest weapon and attack. Although one may suspect that the townspeople would run in fear, one lady cocks her gun and shouts, "Kill them in the head." which quickly creates a mob mentality. The townsfolk vastly outnumber the zombies and begin to get beaten up. The zombies do not attempt to hurt anyone; in fact, those who do not try to run stay completely still and allow themselves to get hurt. The town's people are too scared to recognize this and continue to torment something that is overall harmless to them. It can be assumed from the witch's laughter toward the tortured zombies, that the witch's curse was not on the townspeople but on the zombie court. She brought them back to life because she knew the townspeople would be scared and hurt the court, just as the court had hurt her. If the folks had taken a moment to evaluate the situation and not immediately resulted to violence, the important reveal of the movie may have been gotten much quicker. Zombies are scary, yes, but why waste energy or even ammo on something that poses no threat to you.

Alvin is a bully, he's Norman's bully, in fact. He was created to fit a stereotype; he's big, mean, and very unintelligent. Because of this, an average audience may believe they have his character figured out. He is a generally unkind person and therefore could never be one of the protagonists. But Alvin, despite fulfilling his role as a bully has many more attributes to him that make him a real person. He is not popular (proven by the popular girl's distaste for him), he's awkward, unattractive, and he is a very easily scared person. His tendencies to hurt others are only ever shown towards those smaller than him (i.e Norman, Neil, and the fly) so it could be assumed he only bullies to assert dominance and prevent himself from being the victim. Funnily enough, this brash, distasteful character soon became one of my favorites in the film. He is only a protagonist by circumstance yet he is very complicated and relatable, even more so when thrown under the lens of toxic masculinity.

Finally, we meet Aggie. She is our main antagonist, the witch of Blythe Hollow, and the reason for the current zombie uprising. It was not until the scene at the courthouse when the audience sees she is only an eleven-year-old girl. She was caught communicating to ghosts, and shy and alone Aggie looks an awful lot like our main character. When Norman finally sees Aggie face to face, she is a lot different. She is made completely out of lightning, she floats, pupilless, a monster form of the kid that she used to be. Norman tries to talk to her, but she refuses. She is angry and stubborn and only after revenge. She is willing to put the whole world in danger just to get back at the old court who ripped her away from her mom and hung her. When Norman begins telling her the story of her life, she panics. She tells him she doesn't like the story and just wants it all to stop. It is fairly obvious that Norman pulls this story from a place of understanding and experience, but then Aggie begins to lash out. The anger and fear were the only lasting

elements of a sweet young girl, and they completely changed her and made her a villain.

Norman tells her that she is just like those who hurt her, that she's a bully. As Aggie struggles to realize her reality, Norman grabs her hand. This small gesture changes the scene entirely and she is transported to before everything happened. She and Norman stand in a beautiful open field, Aggie remembered her name and the one person who loved her. During their conversation, Aggie asks if Norman ever wants to hurt those who have hurt him. He says that he does, but it would not do anyone any good. In focusing on the bad people in the world, you can forget the good ones. It is in this moment I saw the true divide between Aggie and Norman. When Norman was on the edge of becoming so full of anger and fear, he had someone reach out to bring him back. Because Norman had his friend Neil the entire premise of the film had completely altered. He had someone to keep him from that fear and was, therefore, able to hold onto himself. In the field, Norman becomes that for Aggie. Even though she is so far gone he still managed to catch her. She lays down under the tree next to Norman, letting the fear and resentment go so that she may finally go to rest, not as "The Witch" but as Aggie.

The human race, as a whole, is deeply corrupted and messed up. Stories like ParaNorman provide emotional maturity and a chance for empathy. There is nothing wrong with a villain who is evil just for the kicks of it, but that does not one hundred percent ring true to real life. Every person is complex and makes mistakes and this film provides wonderful insight. One may not always be the hero and save the town from the witch, but this movie at least encourages kids to try. To me, it has the perfect mix of comedy, emotion, story, and understanding of the world. From the bully, the primary antagonist, and every "villain", ParaNorman has its reason for being. Everyone is controlled by fear and anger, which causes them to make terrible decisions.

Sometimes Neil will pull you from the edge and make you realize that there is so much more to life than bad, but sometimes you'll fall off and only have the energy to be scared and hurt. There is no such thing as a true villain in real life. Even Aggie, the horrible witch, is just a mirror of Norman in different circumstances. I believe that on that fateful Friday in 2012 we were blessed with brilliant pieces of children's media that allowed my generation to grow up with more understanding and love than we originally had. As the promotional photos said, "you don't become a hero by being normal", I think it's fair to say that normality is what turns you into a villain.

Works Cited

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Pictures





