



“You Are the Only Real Superpower I Ever Had”

The Humanity in the Representation of Superpowered Characters  
with Dissociative Identity Disorder in M. Night Shyamalan’s *Split*  
and Disney’s *Moon Knight*

Milou Aluy

BA Thesis in English Literature

“You Are the Only Real Superpower I Ever Had”

The Humanity in the Representation of Superpowered Characters with  
Dissociative Identity Disorder in M. Night Shyamalan’s *Split* and  
Disney’s *Moon Knight*

Milou Aluy

s1024756

BA Thesis in English Literature

Supervised by drs. Dirk Visser

15<sup>th</sup> of August 2023

Radboud University

Title page art by Ollie Oudshoorn

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Teacher who will receive this document: drs. Dirk Visser & Ninge Engelen

Title of document: Resit Thesis Final Draft

Name of course: Bachelor Thesis English Literature

Date of submission: 15-08-2023

Please read the Faculty's Declaration concerning Fraud and Plagiarism preceding this cover sheet. By signing this cover sheet, you also acknowledge your knowledge of and agreement with its terms.

The work submitted here is the sole responsibility of the undersigned, who has neither committed plagiarism nor colluded in its production.

Signed

[the original signature has been removed here due to privacy regulations]

Name of student: Milou Aluy

Student number: s1024756

## Abstract

This bachelor thesis analyses how M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016) and Disney's adaptation of Marvel's *Moon Knight* (2022) represent Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) – formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. The theoretical framework establishes how illness narratives – and DID and other mental illness representations – have a history of negativity due to their incapability to represent people with illness with humanity. From then on, this paper analyses the level of humanness in *Split* and *Moon Knight* through their depictions of their systems as well as their use of superpowers and violence. The analysis shows that *Split* continues the tradition of representing DID with little humanness, causing fear and dehumanisation of the disorder, while *Moon Knight* gives its DID characters a lot of humanness, thus humanising them by portraying the mental condition with sympathy and understanding.

Key words: Dissociative Identity Disorder – illness narratives – *Split* – *Moon Knight* – humanity – focalisation – representation

## Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Cover Sheet	3
Abstract	4
Table of Contents	5
Glossary	6
Chapter I: Introduction	7
Chapter II: Theoretical Framework	10
Health Humanities	10
Illness Narratives	11
The Visible Mad	13
DID Representation in Film	15
Humanity	16
Chapter III: Alters Are People Too	18
Agency	18
Appreciation	20
Characterisation	23
Focalisation	24
Chapter IV: (De)Humanisation in Super-Humanness	28
Superpowers	28
Violence	29
Fear and Humanness	31
Chapter V: Conclusion	35
Discussion	35
Bibliography	38
Appendix	41
I. Plot Descriptions	41
II. Overview of <i>Split</i> 's Personalities	44
III. Character Stills	47

## **Glossary**

### **Terms**

Alternate personality/identity	Personality state created by a person with DID
Core personality/identity	‘Main’ personality state that existed before the person developed DID
Switch	Shift to another personality state
System	Group of personalities in one body
Trope	Commonly used plotline, metaphor, or theme

### **Abbreviations**

Alter	Alternate personality
DID	Dissociative Identity Disorder
DSM(-5)	The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5 <sup>th</sup> edition)

## Chapter I: Introduction

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) has been a staple in mainstream media for over a century. R. L. Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is regarded as the first depiction of DID (Vera Poseck 2008, 127), and after getting its first film adaptation in 1908, the split personality trope has appeared on-screen ever since. From earlier films such as *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) to more contemporary works like *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Hollywood has a long history of portraying the troubled minds of split identities. DID is seen as exotic, odd, and shocking (Merry 2017, 40), and has allowed writers to create mysterious, unpredictable, dramatic, and bizarre storytelling (Byrne 2001, 27); whether it is used as a terrifying plot twist (Vera Poseck 2008, 131) or a tragic character study.

Regardless of its popularity in fiction, DID is only estimated to occur in about 1.5% of the American adult population (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 294). People with DID have at least two or more distinct personality states (alters) as well as recurring episodes of amnesia and dissociation (ibid., 291), which are most often caused by trauma or abuse they experienced in their early childhood (ibid., 294). The disorder also often co-occurs with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self-harm (ibid.) and suicide (ibid., 295). DID – then still known as Multiple Personality Disorder – was officially added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 (Vera Poseck 2008, 129).<sup>1</sup> Although DID had already been present in popular fictional media for decades, there was still little known about it, both by general audiences and medical professionals (Merry 2007, 39). This lack of knowledge in turn attributed to the popularity of the disorder on screen: “[t]he relative

---

<sup>1</sup> The media has influenced the medical narrative of DID for a long time: a short series about a woman with DID called *Sybil* was released in 1976. The show introduced the disorder to a lot of people, both TV audiences and medical specialists, and its success made DID so popular it got added to the DSM-IV just a few years later (Vera Poseck 2008, 129).

scarcity of literature on the disorder (...) is what helped these texts capture the public's imagination" (ibid.).

It seems that Hollywood was more interested in how DID could be used in capturing this public's imagination than in the actual experiences of people who have it. The split personalities of Jekyll and Hyde might not have come from actual DID,<sup>2</sup> but they did start a tradition of DID representation that can still be observed today. The disorder has been represented as something scary and mysterious on numerous occasions and is also often portrayed with the supernatural or subhuman. Two recent DID representations are *Split* (2016) and *Moon Knight* (2022). Both these texts have main plotlines about characters with DID and associate the disorder with the superhuman through superpowers. *Split* is a psychological thriller film directed by M. Night Shyamalan and starring James McAvoy as Kevin Wendell Crumb and his 23 alternate personalities.<sup>3</sup> One of those identities is revealed to be 'the Beast', an alter with superhuman powers such as superstrength and the ability to climb walls. *Moon Knight* is a superhero show produced by Marvel and Disney that follows Stephen Grant, played by Oscar Isaac, who finds out he is an alter created by Marc Spector, a mercenary with mythological superpowers caught in the middle of a deadly conflict between Egyptian gods.<sup>4</sup> The film and series share similar elements, yet approach the disorder differently.

This thesis aims to answer the question: how do *Split* and the first season of *Moon Knight* represent Dissociative Identity Disorder? Firstly, this paper will establish the theoretical framework of the health humanities and previous research on (mental) illness narratives, before reviewing the research done on DID representation specifically. Thereupon, it will analyse the DID representation in *Split* and *Moon Knight* by determining the level of

---

<sup>2</sup> Based on the criteria as described in the DSM-5: DID is a coping mechanism for trauma, but Jekyll develops an alternate personality because of a science experiment.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix II for an overview of the personalities in *Split*.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix I for slightly more elaborate plot descriptions of *Split* and *Moon Knight*.

humanness each text gives their system. I will first compare the texts' humanness with each other through their use of agency, appreciation, characterisation, and focalisation, and then determine the texts' relation to the tradition of dehumanising DID in media through superpowers and violence. Lastly, this thesis will answer the research question and provide a further discussion.

## Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

### Health Humanities

The theoretical framework this thesis will apply to is the health humanities. This discipline serves as a crossroad between healthcare and social sciences, literature, and the arts.

Health Humanities is an exciting way to discover how the arts and humanities provide us with creative and intellectually challenging ways of representing health, illness, and disability. The arts and humanities—which include literature, visual and performing arts, film, drama, philosophy and history—are especially good at enriching our knowledge of the *individual* experience of health and illness: often in the form of stories and imaginatively critical works of art. (SCOPE: The Health Humanities Learning Lab 2017, emphasis in original)

So, the discipline does not just look at how the humanities can build upon medical sciences, but also how the medical sciences can learn and improve through the humanities. It especially focuses on how the humanities can represent individual experiences from the medical world. It differs slightly from the medical humanities, as the health humanities' scope reaches beyond just the professions in medicine and recognises “the authority of non-professionals, patients themselves and their intimate circles of support and care” (Garden 2015, 77).

Sociologist Arthur Frank's book *The Wounded Storyteller* from 1995 is credited for building the foundation of the discipline (Garden 2015, 77). When Frank was being treated for illness himself, he felt that the personal stories of people's illnesses were treated as secondary over the medical narratives, and that only understanding a person through a strictly biomedical approach obstructs a patient from fully healing (ibid.). This “tendency to reductively represent medical procedures and practices in literary texts, especially those used in healthcare education” (ibid., 78) allows for the removal of the authority, identity and

individual experience of a patient or person interacting with the medical field, leading to the dehumanisation of these people. Frank is critical of this thinking and instead encourages that the individual narrative in the medical field needs to be just as involved as the biomedical one.

### **Illness Narratives**

Frank was, however, not the first one to look into the human elements of experiencing illness. In 1988, Arthur Kleinman coined the phrase ‘illness narratives’ in his work *The Illness Narratives; Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (Bolaki 2016, 3). Illness narratives are personal narratives that are “giving expression to the subjective or lived experience of a particular disease or condition, which is distinct from the clinical definition of disease understood as an organic dysfunction within biomedicine” (ibid., 3-4). Kleinman finds these narratives necessary, as he, like Frank, also remarks about the lack of humanity in the medical field. One of the points he makes is that ‘illness’ refers to the human experience (Kleinman 1988, 3-4) while ‘disease’ only means alterations “in biological structure or functioning” (ibid., 5-6). It is when practitioners recast illness as disease, the individual experience – and therefore the human element in experiencing illness – gets lost (ibid., 6). The patient becomes a problem that can be fixed, and their individual experience, especially their suffering, is ignored (ibid., 28). It is through illness narratives that these people can give a voice to their suffering (Bolaki 2016, 4) and that medical workers can truly consider the human experience outside of insufficient technical, objective, and standardized report forms or interviews (Kleinman 1988, 28).

Illness narratives have been praised for providing insights and making improvements for medical practitioners and patients, but the narratives have also been critiqued (Bolaki 2016, 5). A problem that previous research has pointed out is the limitations of approaching illness through a narrative. Angela Woods challenges the notion that someone’s life should be conceived as a narrative: it promotes that “illness specifically calls for or require stories”

(Woods 2011), and that these stories need to adhere to certain standards, mainly that they should be conventional, linear and coherent (ibid.). This approach leaves no room for meaninglessness (Bolaki 2016, 5) or cultural differences (Woods 2011), excluding deviating types of narratives and the people telling them (ibid.). It could be argued that it is impossible to force something so arbitrary and disorderly as an illness experience in a linear and cohesive narrative, but it also does not accurately reflect how many people experience an ailment.

This cultural preference for stories of overcoming and coping with disability reinforces rather than challenges the perception of disability as a tragedy, as an abnormality that must be ‘normalised’. However, rather than ‘coping with’ or ‘overcoming’ their impairments, many disabled people see their impairments as integral to their lives and deeply value the way their impairments have shaped their identities. (Garden 2010, 73)

In a way, illness narratives have gone against what they promote to do – by excluding individual voices in the medical narratives – and also have allowed the erasure of the real experiences of illness in favour of more ‘interesting’ yet conventional narratives.

Another thing these conventional illness narratives endorse is portraying illness through metaphors instead of actual experiences. Similarly to Frank, Susan Sontag incorporated her own experience with illness in her work *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Opposing Frank, however, Sontag instead desires “a frank, medical discussion of her illness” (Merry 2017, 120). She explains how people have looked at illnesses over time, most notably tuberculosis and cancer, the latter still a relatively unknown and misunderstood illness at the time of writing. Tuberculosis was seen as a disease of passion, often making the sick person artistic, interesting, romantic (Sontag 1978, 29-30), creative (ibid., 32), and intelligent (ibid., 37). This idea was so embedded into societal beliefs that the decline of literature and art at the time was blamed on the decline of tuberculosis cases (ibid., 33). Meanwhile, cancer moved

from the nineteenth-century belief that it was “the result of hyperactivity and hyperintensity” (ibid., 52) to the twentieth-century idea of a “contemporary cancer personality”, which was “forlorn, self-hating, [and] emotionally inert” (ibid., 53). Sontag argues that there is a strong notion that physical and mental states overlap (ibid., 56): specific illnesses are caused by specific emotions or mental conditions (ibid., 54) and therefore, physical illness comes from a lack of mental or emotional control or balance. This gets to the point that it is believed that someone gets ill because “they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will; that they can choose not to die of the disease” (ibid., 57). This implies that a person who suffers from an illness has themselves to blame for it; they brought it upon themselves, and if they pass away because of it, they did not fight hard enough. This guilt-shaming view is incredibly damaging to ill people and also leads to people not being able to seek the right medical treatment due to them not fully understanding their illness (ibid., 47). It is a vicious circle: the scarcity of true information leads to people using their imagination to attach meaning and narrative to illness, that in turn overshadows the true information and experiences of illness.

### **The Visible Mad**

This phenomenon of associating illness with specific characteristics – often inaccurate and harmful – also extends to mental illness. Otto F. Wahl pointed out in *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness* how for centuries, there has been an artistic need to portray people who are mentally ill in a visual manner in fictional media, so that the audience can recognize that some kind of madness or insanity is being represented (Wahl 2006, 117).<sup>5</sup> The visual elements related to mental illness are not just meant for storytelling or character design

---

<sup>5</sup> Mental illness does not necessarily have to lead to madness or insanity, but this chapter will use them interchangeably due to them often being perceived as the same thing in this context.

but also are part of a societal need for mental illness to be visible, and most importantly, recognisable.

Sander L. Gilman explains in *Disease and Representation; Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* that this need comes from people wanting to assure themselves in the face of societal fears. It is a scary thing to know that one can be robbed, attacked or assaulted anywhere by anyone. To not feel constant anxiety about it, that anxiety is projected onto distinct outsiders, such as mentally ill people, who tend to act distinctively differently (Gilman 1991, 11).

Our response to the perceived aggressiveness of the mad (as well as of all the other outsiders) reassures us. We have localized the source of our fear. We know who is dangerous. We respond correctly in such situations and thus we have control over our world. But what happens when (...) our preprogrammed, stereotypical perception of the “mad” comes into violent conflict with the realities of mental illness, which do not signal themselves in the expected manner? (...) The banality of real mental illness comes into conflict with our need to have the mad be identifiable, different from ourselves. (...) This moment, when we say, “they are just like us,” is the most upsetting. (ibid., 12-13)

In order not to succumb to fear, people want to be able to identify the kind of people who commit violent crimes; they need those people to be different; and they need them to look differently from themselves. If only visibly mad people are violent, one can assure themselves that they can identify the danger and thus avoid it (Wahl 2006, 126). Mentally ill people are not well understood, they have a different understanding or perception of their surroundings and fall outside of the bounds of an orderly society (ibid., 118): thus, they are the perfect scapegoats for acts of violence. If the media portrays their mental illness visibly and violently,

the societal belief in visible madness relating to violence is confirmed; the audience has been given what they want (ibid.).

### **DID Representation in Film**

Hollywood loves to explore the artistic possibilities of making Dissociative Identity Disorder visible in its characters but does not seem to care that they continue the harmful tradition of restricting narratives and projecting negative metaphors onto people with DID. DID has been delved into through different tropes and genres, such as comedies and dramas, but it also suffers from being restricted by conventional illness narratives. These can be the typical ‘person finds out they have DID, gets therapy<sup>6</sup> and is cured (enough) to take part in society again’ (Merry 2017, 38). In these cases, the fictional texts like to use DID as a metaphor for an individual’s relationship with societal norms and expectations regarding identity and performativity (ibid., 56), very often promoting the narrative that a disability is a utopian solution to fight societal expectations (ibid., 183). This is however harmful to people who have DID, as it does not accurately reflect the difficulties of living with the condition. By portraying DID as a beautiful symbolic strategy to combat normativity, the real-life experiences are overshadowed, and the people who have it are ignored.

DID is also used to feed into and confirm stigmas and fears about mental illness. The representation of DID in cinema— like many other representations of mental illnesses as established by Gilman – also falls victim to associations of violence. From early works in the likes of *Jekyll & Hyde* to cinema icons such as *Psycho* (1960) and *Fight Club* (1999) to recent examples such as *Gotham Knights* (2023), Hollywood has a long history of preferring conventional narratives that link split identities with violence. Oftentimes when DID is represented, the stories – most commonly horror, thriller and detective – that link the disorder

---

<sup>6</sup> Often in the form of reintegration therapy, where the alters are ‘reintegrated’ into a singular main personality.

to violence are more wanted by the audience and thus gain more success. As Krista M. Wise puts it: “Essentially, crazy sells” (Wise 2014, 13). Films with DID and violence are so enjoyed by audiences because they reassure them of their own sanity, in a similar manner as when they observe the visual mad. Their belief is confirmed that the main reason a person could commit such violent acts is because they have a mental illness like DID (ibid., 19). Wise demonstrates how these films continue the tradition of Othering people with DID by creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality. This message of polarisation adds to the audience’s already existing anxieties towards DID, all the while allowing the audience to safely experience those anxieties (ibid., 13-14). “Aided by our mind’s “natural tendency” to latch on to negative stereotypes, horror films feed into the deepest fears of audience members which only serve to further oppress an already marginalized group (...). As a result, audiences either choose to or are forced to associate mental illnesses with uncontrollable evil” (ibid., 11). So, Hollywood likes to promote conventional narratives that confirm and feed into audiences’ anxiety of DID being inextricably linked to violence, seemingly only caring about the success that violent DID stories can bring, and not how these unjust and harmful fears negatively affect people with DID.

## **Humanity**

Previous research about illness narratives demonstrates that opinions are divided on the narratives; however, the opposing arguments all support that people who experience illness should be treated with humanity and empathy. The concept of illness narratives came to life because people wanted their individual stories to be heard so that people could see the human experience in a dominating objective biomedical narrative. Additionally, the illness narratives have been criticised for their restricting conventional narratives and damaging general metaphors, which exclude and overshadow the real stories of experiencing illness as well as establish negative and harmful conceptions about people with an illness, including

mental ones such as DID. However, these critiques come from a desire of wanting to be seen as complex human beings deserving of empathy. In conclusion, no matter on which side of the debate the arguments come from, they all agree that illness narratives should consider and represent the humanity of the people the narratives are about. Nonetheless, previous illness narratives have shown us that people who experience illness, and in this case DID, have not always been represented with much humanity. This thesis shall now analyse the humanity represented in two recent additions to the list of DID portrayals: *Split* and *Moon Knight*.

### Chapter III: Alters Are People Too

How can alters be defined? Are they fabricated identities, created and fragmented by a broken mind, or are they complex and sensible individuals sharing a single body? *Split* and *Moon Knight* do not answer those questions explicitly, but they do present certain levels of humanity to their alters. This chapter will analyse the humanness of the DID systems in *Split* and *Moon Knight* by comparing the texts' use of agency, appreciation, characterisation, and focalisation regarding the alters.<sup>7</sup>

#### Agency

Agency refers to someone's ability to make decisions to achieve a certain goal (Kockelman 2007, 375); thus, character agency can be defined as a character's capability to make active and important decisions that have significance to the story. I argue that a character's agency is inextricably interrelated to their humanity, as in the field of human agency, Williams, Gantt, and Fischer state that agency is linked to the human experience – such as living and feeling – and is what connects people to their “common human ontology” (Williams, Gantt, and Fischer 2021, 10). Therefore, the more agency a character has, the more human they are.

The systems in *Split* and *Moon Knight* display agency through their therapy scenes. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the trope of characters getting therapy is commonly found in DID representation. *Split* and *Moon Knight* are no exception; however, they strongly deviate from the trope by how the characters respond to the therapy. Oftentimes in DID media, therapy cures their DID characters (enough). Yet in the film and series, the reason (some of) the alters end up thriving is not because they settled for the reality that their

---

<sup>7</sup> Due to their limited screentime and prominence to the stories discussed, the new alters featured in *Split*'s sequel *Glass* (2019) and *Moon Knight*'s Jake Lockley will be excluded from this thesis.

therapists presented to them, but because they proved these realities wrong. By going against what their therapists tell them to do and believe, both systems claim agency over themselves.

The unwanted alters in *Split* take agency by proving to their therapist, Dr Fletcher, that her beliefs about the system are untrue. She is blinded by her fascination for the system and does not think it is harmless. Therefore, she acts too softly on the other alters' pleas for help and Dennis' radical statements about the Beast. She believes that people with DID are capable to create physical changes to their bodies but does think that the Beast is too unrealistic. She tries to convince Dennis that the Beast is not real: his superpowers are impossible, and he has never been seen by any alter.<sup>8</sup> However, Dennis refuses to believe her, because he has seen the Beast before. He tells Dr Fletcher that her views on the impossible are too limited: "There are things, Dr Fletcher, that all of us would find hard to believe" (*Split* 2016, 1:14:21). The unwanted alters confute her beliefs by successfully summoning the supposedly impossible subhuman alter. The Beast kills her, subsequently disproving her belief that the alters are not dangerous.

*Moon Knight's* therapy scenes are different but still showcase similarities in the system claiming agency over their beliefs by disproving those of their therapist. Marc and Steven reject what their therapist tells them is real, and instead decide for themselves which reality they want to believe in. The therapy scenes appear when the alters are killed and start experiencing different realities. The therapist Harrow – who has been the antagonist throughout the entire show, adding to the confusion – tries to convince Marc and Steven that the only real reality is what is happening inside his office. However, the different realities are all presented similarly, with no means to visually or narratively distinguish which scenes are

---

<sup>8</sup> Dr Fletcher explains that in Kevin's DID, the alters are all together in a room, a mental space in Kevin's head. The alters can then take turns 'taking the light', which means taking control of the body and be the alter present on the outside. Dr Fletcher asks if Dennis has ever seen the Beast, to which he answers no, so she concludes that if the Beast is not in the mental room with everyone else, he is therefore not really there, and not a real alter.

in real life and which come from some kind of fragmented mental construction created by the system's DID. Therefore, if every reality is presented as equally real, that means that every reality could be real. The system realises that it does not matter that they cannot tell what is supposed to be real and what is not. What is real to *them* matters. Steven's version of events might not correlate with those of Marc or the real world, but Marc was able to deal with his trauma because Steven believed in a reality where he lived a better life than Marc did. They can decide for themselves which reality is real to them, even though Harrow attempts to convince them that his reality is the only correct one. Marc and Steven take agency and refuse to accept Harrow's reality. Harrow states that that means their work is not done yet, but suddenly his feet start bleeding – a callback to an earlier scene with evil Harrow. It does not make sense, but Harrow sees it happen. He looks confused at Marc and Steven as they smile amusingly, having proven to Harrow that his reality is not as sound as he thinks it is. Marc and Steven then leave the therapist's reality behind, instead choosing the reality where they saved the world together.

In short, while *Split* and *Moon Knight* have therapy scenes, they go against the usual therapy tropes often found within DID representation. Both systems' rejected the reality presented by their therapist, as they took agency over their own reality and what they believed to be right – subsequently proving their therapists wrong. Marc and Kevin's reality become too much to bear, so they created a different one through their alters. Now, even in adulthood, those alters refuse to let these realities go because they were told to. Thus, by having alters make their own decisions that influence their stories, *Split* and *Moon Knight* give them agency, and hence add humanness to their personalities.

## **Appreciation**

Another means of analysing how the texts approach their systems is through the alters' interactions, specifically in their appreciation of each other. This appreciation is telling if the

alters regard one another as just other personality states in the same system, or as individual humane beings. A similarity in *Split* and *Moon Knight* is that they both show moments where the alters work together, and even occasionally depend on each other. The unwanted alters work together to successfully summon the Beast. Marc and Steven occasionally switch depending on which person's skills are needed in a situation, and even share the Moon Knight suit together during the final battle. The alters have a psychological purpose too: Dennis and Steven are revealed to both be specifically created first by Kevin and Marc to protect the core personalities from their trauma of losing a family member and their mothers' abuse.

The alters may need each other from time to time, but that does not mean they are necessarily grateful for each other: both texts have scenes of the systems arguing or expressing their displeasure with one another. That is where the similarities between the film and show end: *Split*'s system shows much more ingratitude towards itself than the one in *Moon Knight*. *Split* is a story of the Horde resisting the other alters' mockery and disagreements until they successfully overtake and triumph over the system. The story of *Moon Knight*'s alters is not about victory over unappreciative personalities, but about learning to appreciate and love each other. This contrast between the texts' character developments of the alters shows how *Split* and *Moon Knight* differ in how their systems regard themselves.

The alters barely show any appreciation for each other in *Split*. Dennis states that his and Patricia's belief in the Beast is why they are deemed unwanted by the other alters. "They keep calling us The Horde. The others, you know? Miss Patricia and I, we are ridiculed. Now, we're not perfect, but we don't deserve to be ridiculed" (*Split* 2016, 57:59). The other alters are shown to express their annoyance or disagreement with the unwanted alters, either through emails, to each other, or in the scene where the alters try to take control when Kevin briefly takes over. In that scene, Orwell states: "We have been wronged by this alliance, this horde of Patricia, Dennis and the boy. Their actions do not represent us" (*ibid.*, 1:36:02). This

highlights that the other alters think of the unwanted as obstacles and difficulties for the system to function as they want to. When Kevin learns about the pain his alternate personalities have caused, he asks Casey to kill him and the entire system. The only times one of the alters expresses any kind of appreciation for another, is from the members of the Horde, and mostly when referring to the Beast. There is some appreciation for the other alters and for what they have done for Kevin and the system, especially for Dennis: “Kevin is really lucky to have you” (ibid., 1:11:36). However, that appreciation is not voiced by the alters, but only by Dr Fletcher.

It takes a while before *Moon Knight*'s Marc and Steven become “the ultimate bromance” (Decker and Seawright 2022a, 26:07). The alters do not like each other's presence at first. They criticise the other's actions and have arguments, mostly about who should take control of the system. This kind of bickering and disliking happens often in the beginning but reduces later on. The more they work together, the more they learn about each other, and the more the men start to appreciate each other. The afterlife scenes in the mental hospital show that the alters care for each other: Marc feels worried when he cannot find Steven – and feels relieved when he finally does – and the alters console each other when they realise how much Steven has done for Marc in his difficult childhood. When the two find themselves hopelessly trapped in the Egyptian limbo, Marc refuses to let go of Steven, sacrificing his only opportunity to move on to the peaceful afterlife. He manages to express his gratitude and love for Steven before they seemingly get stuck forever:

You saved me. I survived because I knew I wasn't alone. You were always there, alive, full of hope. And I tried to protect that, and I failed. I couldn't protect you. But you didn't abandon me. (...) There's no way in hell I'm gonna abandon you. You are the only real superpower I ever had. (*Moon Knight* 2022, 1x6 15:43)

Marc appreciating Steven is what ends up freeing them from the limbo and allowing them to go back to the mortal world – but not before they share an incredibly heartfelt hug. At the end of the show, Marc and Steven share a great appreciation for each other: they now care for and love one another.<sup>9</sup>

The biggest difference between the alters' treatment of each other is that *Moon Knight*'s system shows far more appreciation for each other than *Split*'s; therefore, the system in *Moon Knight* shows more humanness than in *Split*. *Split*'s alters show little gratitude towards one another: the alters regard the personalities that oppose them as mere obstacles or deviations in the system. Therefore, the alters deem the others as just things, not people. For this reason, *Split*'s system looks upon itself with little humanness. Contrarily, *Moon Knight*'s system's increasing self-appreciation shows how Marc and Steven treat each other with love and humanity, and thus humanness.

### **Characterisation**

The systems can also grant themselves humanness through the way they are characterised. Characterisation is the act of presenting characters through telling and/or showing their characteristics to an audience (Venturino 2013, 20). I will use this to determine that *Split* and *Moon Knight* similarly present their alters in a manner that shows their distinctiveness from each other, and thus give each alter a certain level of individuality and therefore humanness. Each system is played by one actor each – James McAvoy in *Split* and Oscar Isaac in *Moon Knight*, respectively – but their alters have unique and recognisable features, both subtle and glaring, so the audience can still tell which alter is on screen without

---

<sup>9</sup> This is also reflected in the musical score: the song “A Man Without Love” by Engelbert Humperdinck is prominently featured in the beginning of the show, as it is played every time Steven wakes up. The line “Every day I wake up, then I start to break up / Lonely is a man without love” shows how Steven was broken (in a more literal sense too, with his fragmented DID mind) and without love when he woke up by himself. The song is played one more time at the end, this time when Marc and Steven wake up together. It indicates the contrast between the scenes of Steven being alone, and this scene of waking up together with Marc: because of Marc, Steven is no longer lonely, and no longer a man without love.

them being explicitly called by their name. The alters dress, move and talk differently: for example, Hedwig slurs his speech, Dennis is very focused on hygiene, Patricia wears dresses, Steven has a British accent, Marc's hair is smoothly brushed back, and so on.<sup>10</sup> *Moon Knight* also has two different Moon Knight suit designs that switch depending on which alter is in control when wearing it.<sup>11</sup> Both texts show their alters having some humanness through their characteristics. However, *Moon Knight* does more so than *Split*. *Moon Knight* is over 3 hours longer than *Split*, and Marc and Steven are the protagonists of the show, while *Split*'s system serves as the antagonist. Therefore, the alters in *Moon Knight* have more time to showcase their individuality, characteristics, and perspectives.

### **Focalisation**

Lastly, this 'showcasing a story through a character's perspective' is called focalisation (Bal 1997, 142). It provides narrative, empathy, understanding, and also humanness to a character by portraying them as a reflection of real-world human beings, as complex individuals who have thoughts and experiences that shape their worldview and their actions. Thus, focalisation gives a character humanness. I will analyse the focalisation in *Split* and Disney's adaptation of *Moon Knight* by comparing each of them to a specific run of the *Moon Knight* comics – the 2014-15 Ellis and Shalvey run and the 2016-17 Lemire and Smallwood run – as described by Charlie Christie in 'Sane Superheroes: Mental Distress in the Gutters of *Moon Knight*' (2019).

*Split*'s alters are given little focalisation, which is similar to the 2014-15 *Moon Knight* comic run. Christie explains that in this run, core personality Marc Spector is drawn in a manner that is visually distinct from his alters, which are merging with the background,

---

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix II for more detailed descriptions of *Split*'s alters, as well as Appendix III for images of the alters from both texts.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix III.

appearing as ghost-like entities with dark shadings who do not speak. Christie argues that this removes the focalisation of the alternate personalities, as they are presented as just background entities, with no voice or narrative of their own (Christie 2019, 62).

This manner of portraying alters could be compared to *Split*. Most of the system are just background characters too, with essentially no focalisation nor individual narrative. They are just there, only existing for the sake of existing. Barry, Jade, and Orwell may have some individuality but they serve no purpose to the story individually, only as a part of the anti-unwanted group.<sup>12</sup> Sixteen alters do not even appear in the film. They are just used as a device to create intrigue and mystery around the system. Similarly to the 2014-15 *Moon Knight* comics, most of *Split*'s alters are just tools to add to the plot, "rather than being separate legitimate selves" (ibid., 63). Some of the alters do have focalisation, but it is minimal. The only alter where the film shows their point of view is Kevin – the core personality, like Marc in the comic run – but only for a few seconds before he – and his agency over his system – are overtaken by the other alters. Furthermore, the Horde has their own narrative but their focalisation is also still limited: *Split* is mostly told through the perspective of Casey and Dr Fletcher. The audience looks at the characters and their DID in the same manner the protagonists do. Therefore, the alters do not tell their own story; they have no focalisation over it.

The story of the *Moon Knight* series is told through the perspective of its alters, so they have more focalisation. Therefore, the show is comparable to the 2016-17 run of its source material. Both this run and the show portray the alters not as background characters, but as complex individuals deserving of empathy and understanding through what Christie describes as a "polyphonic narrative" – a narrative told through multiple voices (ibid., 72). In

---

<sup>12</sup> Barry does have some narrative, as his trauma of getting sexually assaulted caused the unwanted alters to take control of the system. However, it is barely a part of the film, as it happened before the events of the movie and is told (by another character), not shown.

some of the comic's issues, each alter is drawn by a different artist and thus gets their own visually unique and distinct perception of the world around them (ibid., 72-74). This gives the existence of the alters legitimacy, as well as focalisation in a manner that approaches the alters as individual personalities that have their own narratives, worldviews and experiences (ibid., 74). The different art styles let the reader experience the "jarring realities" and "the panic and confusion of DID, rather than just watching it from a distanced perspective" (ibid.).

While the show does not have visually distinct styles to portray the worldviews of Marc and Steven separately, it does add a similar kind of legitimacy to the alters by starting the story from Steven's perspective. He is not the core personality, but that is not revealed until the fifth episode. The show does not treat him as just an alternate personality; in fact, he is the main character. The audience does not know what Steven also does not: they do not see what happens when Steven blacks out or hallucinates, or what information Marc and the other characters are hiding from him. The story is told solely through Steven until the third episode, when he finds out about Marc and bits of the story are told from Marc's perspective as well.<sup>13</sup> The audience gets to know what it is like to see the world through Marc and mostly Steven's DID. The aforementioned confusing scenes in Harrow's office add to the viewer's immersion in Marc and Steven's fragmented minds. Similarly to the comics, the audience is in the same boat as the characters through their shared confusion. Neither of them can tell which scenes are really happening and which scenes are created from a mental construction (ibid., 71), "echoing a confusion of not knowing how parts of reality and perception fit together" (ibid., 74). This technique of showing the perspective of someone with DID is "demanding both empathy and confusion from the reader to be understood" (ibid., 72), completely

---

<sup>13</sup> Most of the focalisation is still with Steven though, as the audience still only knows what he knows as well. Details about Marc's life are not revealed to the audience until Steven learns about them. For example, in some of the scenes where bits of Marc and Layla's history together are revealed through their conversations, Steven is seen in reflections, meaning he is learning that information at that moment too.

drawing the audience into the experience of the alters. Through the polyphonic narrative, the viewers are drawn into Marc and Steven's perception of reality, distorted by their DID. Through this approach, *Moon Knight* gives the alters – and Steven specifically – all the focalisation in their story.

*Split* and *Moon Knight* both use various elements to portray a certain level of humanness to their alters. Both systems show that they have agency through rejecting their therapists' advice, and characterisation through their portrayals that highlights their individuality. While *Split* also has some appreciation for its own system and a little focalisation, it is close to nothing compared to how *Moon Knight*'s system treats itself and is treated by the series. It gives its alters a lot of self-love throughout their journey of appreciation for each other as well as a lot of focalisation by telling the story from their point of view. Therefore, *Moon Knight* represents their DID characters with significantly more humanness than *Split* does.

In fact, the small amount of humanness that *Split*'s DID characters have comes from the Horde. They are the only ones who display agency by successfully executing their plan to dominate over the others, the only ones to show some kind of appreciation for other alters, the ones who have the most individuality in the entire system, and the only ones who have some focalisation besides Kevin. The alters that are the most violent and subhuman are the ones that display the most humanness – even if it is limited. *Moon Knight*'s situation seems to be similar: even though its alters show much more humanness than in *Split*, they also commit violent acts while possessing superhuman abilities. It is an interesting conclusion how the violent alters are most human, considering how DID representation is often associated with fear and violence, which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, should lead to the dehumanisation of the alters.

## Chapter IV: (De)Humanisation in Super-Humanness

The next section will explore how *Split* and *Moon Knight* either humanise or dehumanise their characters with DID through their use of violence and fear. As mentioned before in the theoretical framework, DID in media is often associated with violence and fear. *Split* and *Moon Knight* also both have elements of violence and fear, as well as plotlines regarding superpowers and humanness, which are all used to either establish or remove the humanity of their DID characters. I will analyse and compare how the texts portray superpowers and violence, and how that relates to their depiction of fear and humanness.

### Superpowers

*Split* and *Moon Knight* have characters that have DID as well as superpowers. The powers of the Beast and the Moon Knight suit are not too different from each other, but there is a big distinction between the source of these powers. The powers from the Beast that we see are superstrength, running fast on all fours, climbing walls, and invincibility. Moon Knight's<sup>14</sup> powers are not very clear, but the suit seems to increase strength, speed, fighting skills and endurance, as well as the ability to fly and communicate with Khonshu. The big difference between the texts is that the Beast's powers come from his DID, while Moon Knight's powers do not. The Beast is created from Kevin's DID because the condition can cause physical changes and therefore different superhuman physical limits in *Split*.<sup>15</sup> Moon Knight's superpowers come from the suit he gets as Khonshu's avatar, so his mystical abilities have nothing to do with his DID.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> When talking about the character of Moon Knight specifically, I refer to the superheroic identity that comes from the suit, not to any of the personalities in particular.

<sup>15</sup> It should be mentioned that this logic is entirely fictional, and only applies to DID in the fictional world of *Split*. In the real world, it is not possible for alters to have physical capabilities that exceed the system's body, and DID in itself does not cause (superhuman) physical changes (Decker and Seawright 2022b, 11:24).

<sup>16</sup> There are certain portrayals of Khonshu in earlier *Moon Knight* comics that do represent Khonshu as an alter (Christie 2019, 60). The show does that slightly too when Harrow talks about the voices in Steven's head – Marc and Khonshu – thus grouping the god with the alter.

The texts' approach in relating superpowers to DID reveals the difference in how the texts look at DID. Both texts treat DID as a superpower, but in *Split*, it is meant literally, and in *Moon Knight*, it is an analogy. A big theme in *Split* is the importance of suffering, which is how the Beast gains his powers. Kevin developed DID because he endured so much suffering, and this mental condition caused him to unlock something greater, more evolved and subhuman within himself. The film shows that DID can cause physical changes to a system due to their extraordinary ability to hyperfocus, and therefore have access to some kind of superhuman greatness: "Have these individuals, through their suffering, unlocked the potential of the brain? Is this the ultimate doorway to all things we call unknown? Is this where our sense of the supernatural comes from?" (*Split* 2016, 36:55). Therefore, the Beast got his powers because of DID. On the other hand, the superpowers from DID in *Moon Knight* are not as literal. The actual superhuman powers come from an Egyptian god and thus not from his mental abilities. Marc says that Steven is the only real superpower he has ever had, which is figurative: Steven by himself does not have superpowers, but Steven could be poetically compared to a superhero because of how he saved Marc. The superpowers here are not superhuman abilities unlocked through DID, but the abilities of DID itself. In *Split*, the superpowers came from DID; in *Moon Knight*, the superpowers are DID.

## **Violence**

If there are superpowers in a science-fiction work, especially combined with DID representation, then on-screen violence is a given. As discussed before, there is a long tradition of portraying characters with DID with violent tendencies. *Split* and *Moon Knight* both have their DID characters knowingly commit multiple acts of violence, even murder, and thus fit into that tradition. However, the characters treat violence differently. The alters who commit violence in *Split* seem indifferent towards using violence, while Marc and Steven show some level of remorse for their violent actions in *Moon Knight*.

Firstly, in *Split*, the violence that takes place is because the unwanted alters do what needs to be done to use their DID to its full potential. Dennis kidnaps Casey and her friends and makes sure they cannot escape and incapacitates Dr Fletcher. He does not show regret for doing this, but he also does not seem to enjoy it either. He does not hurt them more than necessary – not even when they attempt to escape – and even makes the situation not too uncomfortable for them, providing the girls with beds, a bathroom and cleaning supplies. Dennis is just doing what needs to be done, nothing more, nothing less: he is indifferent towards the girls' lives and his actions. The Beast is similar too: he is more violent and sinister than the rest of the system, but he only kills people who have not suffered, and thus do not fit into his worldview that only people who have suffered deserve to live. He only kills when his belief deems it necessary, he only does what needs to be done to create his perfect world. He does not show remorse or joy; in fact, the moment he is the most joyful is when he finds out he does not have to kill Casey, as she proves she has suffered. The alters who commit violence are indifferent towards their actions and do not show remorse for it, as they believe it is simply something that must be done to get what they want. The unwanted alters in *Split* are violent because they want to use their DID to evolve into something superhuman. They are violent because of their DID.

Secondly, in *Moon Knight*, Marc and Steven are not as indifferent towards hurting and killing, but that does not mean they always feel bad about their violence. On top of that, they do not commit violence because of reasons related to DID.<sup>17</sup> They do not feel remorse for every act of violence, because they distinguish between which were necessary and which were not. The necessary ones are when they have to defend themselves or others or have to save the world. It is always justified if the good-hearted protagonist hurts or even kills bad guys in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, so the show does not try to make the audience feel

---

<sup>17</sup> The violence is only related to DID when Marc and Steven find methods to punch each other.

too bad for them. Steven's character arc is even about him gaining the ability and courage to fight bad guys alongside Marc. However, Marc and Steven try to not cause any more damage than is necessary – Steven more than Marc – and do not resort to killing unless there are no other options. The unnecessary acts of violence are those that were ordered to Marc by Khonshu, and thereby the ones Marc feels remorse about.<sup>18</sup> In episode five, there is a scene where a room in the asylum is filled with people Marc has killed because Khonshu used Marc to punish them. Even though these people were evildoers, Marc tells Steven that he did not want to do any of it. “Try taking a life. See how quickly you forget. Kept wishing I'd fail and one of them would kill me instead. [Khonshu's] healing ended up being a curse” (*Moon Knight* 2022, 1x5 13:36). So, even though *Moon Knight's* alters do not always feel bad for committing violence, they show much more remorse than *Split's* alters. Marc and Steven only harm others when they are forced to – either because of Khonshu or because they have to defend themselves or others from the bad guys.

### **Fear and Humanness**

As outlined earlier, the media likes to use DID to play into the fear that audiences already tend to have towards people who have a mental illness. That is why DID is often associated with violence, as the audience tends to project their fear of falling victim to violent crimes onto people with DID. This has led to much negative stigmatisation and misinformation about DID. *Split* and *Moon Knight* both associate DID with superpowers and violence, but they differ in how they relate DID to those elements. As a result of that, there is also a difference in how the two texts incorporate fear and (de)humanisation in DID.

---

<sup>18</sup> There are deaths unrelated to Khonshu that Marc also feels remorse about: that of his younger brother, which was his fault, and those of a group of workers by a tomb, which he could not save from his boss' 'no witnesses' order. However, he was just responsible for those deaths and did not do the killing himself.

*Split* continues this tradition by making the audience fear the characters with DID.

The system is the antagonist, and although there are some moments shown from the perspectives of the alters, they are not the characters we are supposed to relate with. That character is Casey, the protagonist, who gets kidnapped to be sacrificed and has, therefore, every right to be afraid of them. The audience thus experiences the story from her view, making them relate to Casey's fear of the alters. The audience is kept at a constant distance from the DID characters, so the film creates unpredictability and uncertainty around the alters. Kevin and the rest of the system become what Gilman describes as 'the bag-lady': a woman with rough clothes and bags, yelling at an unseen person. People walk around her because they are afraid that she might suddenly turn to them and hurt them because of her uncontrolled and ""insane" rage" (Gilman 1991, 12). The audience is constantly on the edge of their seat because it is unsure what alter might take over, and what violence they could unleash upon the heroine. The audience's fear is confirmed when they see the acts of violence the system commits: for example, when the Beast kills Dr Fletcher, the only character who showed them genuine empathy. Dr Fletcher was wrong to trust the system and to believe they were harmless. She should have feared them, then she would not have died. The violence and the superpowers come from DID, making the audience fear the characters and the condition.

The audience's nerves about DID are not eased when they are introduced to the Beast. The character of the Beast is a perfect example of the media's tendency to dehumanise people with DID. I already discussed in the theoretical framework that films like *Split* Other people with DID by creating an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. Because the representations of DID characters act nothing like us due to their mental illness, it becomes easier for us to dehumanise them. "Those with mental illnesses are, if the television image is to be believed, truly a breed apart, a special, distinct class of people characterized primarily, if not exclusively, by the illnesses they suffer" (Wahl 2006, 43). *Split* takes this concept of mentally

ill people being “a breed apart” and takes it to another level, by suggesting that the DID is making their system unhuman. The film keeps telling us that DID can give people abilities beyond what should be humanly possible, and this un-humanness manifests in the character of the Beast. As the name would suggest, the Beast is portrayed as a beast: he is animal-like and scary, runs on all fours, growls, kills and eats people.<sup>19</sup> When he pulls away iron bars to get to Casey, his un-humanness is solely meant to make the audience fear him. Bloodshot eyes, black pupils, a menacing grin, blood around the mouth and between the teeth, exposed veins, bones and muscles that seem to rip off from his body at any second. We are not looking at an alter, or even a human being. We are looking at the Beast.<sup>20</sup> The alters – especially the Beast – are scary because of their DID: their mental condition is what made them violent, what gave them superhuman powers, and what made them inhuman.

*Moon Knight* looks at superpowers and violence differently, which is why their representation of fear and humanness differs from *Split*. As stated before, the mystical superpowers and the acts of violence in the show are not a result of DID. They are therefore also not presented as reasons to be fearful of the disorder or the characters that have it. The show does play into the fears of the audience, but not because of the threat of ‘insane violence’. Instead, the show makes the audience anxious for the well-being of the main characters or creeped out by the scary tomb zombies from episode four. There are occasions where DID is an inconvenience or obstruction for the characters, but the show’s depiction of DID does not nearly cause all the negativity that it causes in *Split*, because it does not portray

---

<sup>19</sup> In case the name and beast-like behaviour were not obvious enough, the film provides more hints that the Beast is closer to an animal than to a human: the system lives in a zoo; when Casey gets rescued, she walks past exhibits with lions and tigers that try to attack her; shortly after that, the film slowly zooms in on a statue of lions; the news reporter refers to the Beast as “an amalgam of (...) various animals” (*Split* 2016, 1:51:37); and the Beast yells to Casey: “Can’t you see I am not human?” (ibid., 1:42:36).

<sup>20</sup> In most of the scenes, the Beast is not fully visible, hidden by shadows or through camera angles that purposefully obstruct the viewer from seeing him completely. This mystery around the Beast’s physique also adds to the suspense and anxiety about the character.

the condition as something to be afraid of. *Moon Knight* thus does the exact opposite from *Split*: the series lets the audience relate to the characters with DID, not fear them.

In the previous chapters, it was discussed how *Moon Knight's* use of focalisation draws the audience into the experience of DID, instead of letting them observe it from a distance, and thus creates empathy and understanding from the viewers. The text's focalisation also diminishes the fears associated with DID and adds humanness to the alters as well. By giving the alters focalisation and telling the story through their eyes, the audience learns about their personality and how they act and think. This erases the sense of unpredictability and uncertainty around DID that the tension in *Split* is built upon. The audience learns that there is no reason to be afraid of Marc and Steven, or of their DID; they will not unleash violence upon anyone because of their mental disorder.

In fact, Steven's focalisation humanises him. He is the main character, the protagonist, and he has agency and narrative, which creates credibility and complexity in his character (Christie 2019, 74). Steven might be the alternate identity, an alter made up by the core personality Marc, but he has just as much humanness as Marc. He is not just a personality state or a way to add more characters to Isaac's acting resume. *Moon Knight* treats Steven as a complex, three-dimensional, and rounded character. More importantly, it treats Steven as a real human being.

In short, *Split* and *Moon Knight* share similar elements in portraying DID but deal with those elements entirely differently from each other. In *Split*, the superpowers and violence are a result of DID, thus making the audience fear the disorder and the characters that have it. The film, therefore, conforms to the tradition of dehumanising DID. *Moon Knight*, on the other hand, moves away from that tradition. The series also portrays superpowers and violence, but not as a result of the mental disorder. On top of that, the use of focalisation removes the fear often associated with DID, and actually humanises the alters.

## Chapter V: Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to answer the question: how do *Split* and *Moon Knight* represent Dissociative Identity Disorder? To answer that question, this thesis first delved into the theoretical framework of the health humanities to take a brief look into illness narratives. The previous research revealed that researchers are split on whether these narratives are essential or harmful. However, all arguments – either in favour or against the narratives – are about the importance of considering people who experience illness with humanity. Therefore, this paper analysed how *Split* and *Moon Knight* represented humanness in their characters with DID.

Firstly, how the systems are portrayed through agency, appreciation, characterisation, and focalisation, shows that *Split* gives their alters a limited amount of humanness, while *Moon Knight* gives them a lot. Secondly, this was also the case when approaching the texts through the tradition of representing DID with super-humanness – superpowers – and violence, which leads to anxieties about people with DID as well as the dehumanisation of them. *Split* sticks to this tradition by portraying all the violence and super-humanness as a result of DID, making audiences fear and dehumanise people with DID. *Moon Knight* does the opposite: it detaches DID from superpowers and violence and tells the audience that they do not need to be afraid of people with DID by drawing the audiences into their worldviews through focalisation. Therefore, I have determined that *Moon Knight* represents DID with much more humanity than *Split* does.

### Discussion

My analysis has shown that it is possible to depict DID with humanity. Hollywood continues to fall back into negative and scary stereotypes with projects such as *Split*, however, my research brings awareness to the fact that the industry is capable of portraying DID with humanness instead of fear with *Moon Knight*. The series can thus serve as an example of how

DID could, and definitely should be represented in future narratives. It will take time before positive representations become the norm – as the aforementioned recent *Gotham Knights* regrettably demonstrates – but I argue that *Moon Knight* is a step in the right direction.

Future research needs to be undertaken to determine *Split* and *Moon Knight*'s exact impact on DID representation. Additionally, this analysis did not engage with DID itself or the perspectives of the people who have it. Therefore, additional studies could examine *Split* and *Moon Knight* with a psychological approach and provide an academic analysis of the accuracy of the texts' DID representation, or look into their reception with the general audience and the DID community. The reader should bear in mind that I have not studied psychology nor do I have DID myself. Further research should hence include the perspectives of medical professionals and people with DID as well to develop a full picture of the texts' DID representation.

That is not to say that my contribution to this discussion does not matter. I wrote this thesis intending to bring awareness to the effect that representation can have, and what it can accomplish if writers think outside of the negativity that is so often found in DID representation, and approach people who have the disorder with consideration and humanity. As stated before, representation matters because it has real-world consequences for how people regard other people who are different from themselves. If a certain group of people is represented with humanity, they will then be regarded with humanity. That is how DID narratives – and all illness narratives for that matter – need to be done. “You look at *Split*. (...) So many times (...) [DID] is portrayed, it's creepy or it's a gimmick. (...) And here [in *Moon Knight*], it is portrayed with such compassion and realism. (...) [P]eople with DID have suffered and they deserve compassion, not fear and judgement” (Decker and Seawright 2022a, 16:37). They should not be represented as case studies or stereotypes, defined solely

by their illness and constricted by the conventions of illness narratives. Instead, they deserve to be represented as human beings, with individuality, complexity, sympathy, and humanity.

Those qualities are the reasons *Split* and *Moon Knight* differ. *Split*'s system displayed them insufficiently and thus was portrayed so negatively and inhumanely, while *Moon Knight* used those aspects to humanise and create sympathy and understanding for its DID characters. *Split* is the kind of representation that researchers have disapproved of for decades; *Moon Knight* is the representation that has finally achieved the change they wanted to see in DID narratives. Now, it is up to the film industry, the audiences, and the academic world to continue pushing for this change. Then, there will be more positive DID representations by the time the second season of *Moon Knight* comes out.

Word count excluding footnotes, appendices, and references: 9,124

## Bibliography

- Acuna, Kirsten. "James McAvoy Plays a Character with 24 Different Personalities in 'Glass' - Here They All Are." *Insider*, April 16, 2019. <https://www.insider.com/james-mcavoy-split-characters-2019-1>.
- American Psychiatric Association. "Dissociative Disorders." In *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 291–307. American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Bolaki, Stella. *Illness as Many Narratives: Arts, Medicine and Culture*. JSTOR. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzc8v>.
- Byrne, Peter. "The Butler(s) DID It - Dissociative Identity Disorder in Cinema." *Medical Humanities* 27, no. 1 (June 1, 2001): 26–29. <https://doi.org/10.1136/mh.27.1.26>.
- Christie, Charlie. "Sane Superheroes: Mental Distress in the Gutters of *Moon Knight*." In *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability*, edited by Scott T. Smith and José Alaniz, 59-78. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.
- Decker, Jonathan, and Alan Seawright. "Psychology of a Hero: Moon Knight and Dissociative Identity Disorder." YouTube. Cinema Therapy, October 2022a.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr6tO2j5v9g&t=1s>.
- Decker, Jonathan, and Alan Seawright. "Villain Therapy: Split and Dissociative Identity Disorder." YouTube. Cinema Therapy, October 2022b.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqs9VUzyz8o&t=947s>.

Diab, Mohamed, director. 2022. *Moon Knight*. Disney+. 6 episodes.

<https://www.disneyplus.com/welcome/moon-knight>.

Garden, Rebecca. "Disability and Narrative: New Directions for Medicine and the Medical Humanities." *Medical Humanities* 36, no. 2 (July 23, 2010): 70–74.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/jmh.2010.004143>.

Garden, Rebecca. "Who Speaks for Whom? Health Humanities and the Ethics of Representation." *Medical Humanities* 41, no. 2 (March 2, 2015): 77–80.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2014-010642>.

Gilman, Sander L. *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*.

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. New

York, NY: Basic Books, 1988.

Kockelman, Paul. "Agency: The Relation between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge."

*Current Anthropology* 48, no. 3 (June 2007): 375–401. <https://doi.org/10.1086/512998>.

Merry, Hannah Kathryn. "Fictional Representations of Dissociative Identity Disorder in Contemporary American Fiction." PhD Thesis, Keele University, 2017.

<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Fictional-representations-of-dissociative-identity-Merry/08e19944110feafa974c3466dc05581b5b46d132>.

SCOPE: The Health Humanities Learning Lab. "What Is Health Humanities?" University of

Toronto, 2017. <https://www.utoronto.ca/labs/scope/about/>.

Shyamalan, M. Night, director. 2016. *Split*. Universal Pictures. 1hr., 57 min.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80124506>.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

Venturino, Steven J. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*.

Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2013.

Vera Poseck, Beatriz. "I was the murderer! Or the Dissociative Identity Disorder in cinema."

Originally in Spanish, translator unknown. *Revista de Medicina y Cine* 2, no. 4  
(October 20, 2006): 125–32.

Wahl, Otto F. *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*. New Brunswick, NB: Rutgers  
University Press, 2006.

Williams, Richard N., Edwin E. Gantt, and Lane Fischer. "Agency: What Does It Mean to Be  
a Human Being?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (September 20, 2021): 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.693077>.

Wise, Krista Michelle. "'I Won't Let Anyone Come Between Us': Representations of Mental  
Illness, Queer Identity, and Abjection in *High Tension*." Master's thesis, Bowling  
Green State University, 2014.

[http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=bgsu1395416795](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1395416795).

Woods, Angela. "The Limits of Narrative: Provocations for the Medical Humanities." *Medical  
Humanities* 37, no. 2 (2011): 73–78. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2011-010045>.

## Appendix

### I. Plot Descriptions

This part will provide brief plot descriptions of *Split* and *Moon Knight*. Due to their polyphonic narratives and lengthy duration – almost two hours for *Split* and over five hours for *Moon Knight*, respectively – the summaries will focus mostly on the DID characters and will therefore not include a lot of details or side stories.

#### *Split*

*Split* follows the story of Casey, a young girl who gets kidnapped with two of her friends by Dennis. Dennis is one of the 24 personalities of Kevin Wendell Crumb. Dennis is part of a group of ‘unwanted’ alters, together with a woman called Patricia and the child alter Hedwig. They are outcasts in the system, because they believe that the 24<sup>th</sup> alter is the Beast, an alter with superhuman strength, bulletproof skin and the ability to climb walls. Dennis wants to sacrifice Casey and her friends to summon him. The other alters grow concerned with this plan but are unable to take control and stop them. They do manage to contact their therapist Dr Fletcher. She too believes that people with DID are capable of something extraordinary but tells Dennis that the Beast is not real. After a particularly panicked email from the other alters, Dr Fletcher decides to visit Dennis unannounced and by herself. Dennis incapacitates her after she finds one of the kidnapped friends. Dennis goes to the train station to switch into the Beast and returns to kill Dr Fletcher and the two friends. Casey finds a note from Dr Fletcher left behind with Kevin’s full name on it, which triggers him to take control. Kevin does not stay there for long, however, as the alters fight for control. Hedwig and Patricia are victorious and allow the Beast to come through again. Casey flees and is unable to hold him off, but the Beast spares her when he sees the scars on her body. They are caused by Casey’s abusive uncle and guardian, and since the Beast strongly believes that only people

who have suffered deserve to live, he runs off. Casey is rescued by a maintenance worker, and the film ends with Dennis, Patricia and Hedwig discussing their plans with the Beast, setting the film up for its sequel *Glass* (2019).

### ***Moon Knight***

The first two episodes of *Moon Knight* are about Steven Grant, a gift shop employee, finding out he shares a body with a mercenary named Marc Spector. Marc is a human avatar for the Egyptian god Khonshu, who wants to stop Arthur Harrow. Harrow wants to summon Ammit, a goddess who exacts justice by killing future wrongdoers. After getting kidnapped by Harrow and saved by Marc's wife Layla El-Faouly, Marc takes over and travels to Egypt to stop Harrow from reaching the tomb. In the third and fourth episodes, Marc and Steven have to work together and switch occasionally to use their expertise and knowledge, and eventually manage to locate the tomb with Layla. However, Harrow is there too, and he shoots and kills Marc and Steven. Marc wakes up in a mental hospital by himself. In the last two episodes, there are three separate stories taking place in their own reality: Layla in the mortal realm, Marc (and later Steven) having therapy sessions with Harrow, and Marc and Steven in the afterlife. In the latter, Marc runs around in the mental hospital and finds Steven in a tomb. They find out the mental hospital is a liminal space on a ship sailing through the Duat, a sandy landscape they have to get through to reach the Field of Reeds, the peaceful afterlife. Marc and Steven are not allowed into the Field yet, because their hearts are unbalanced. To balance them, they have to go through Marc's childhood memories and trauma. Steven finds out he is in an alter created by Marc, so he could deal with the guilt of his brother's death and the subsequent abuse from his mother. He started to serve Khonshu when the god saved Marc from death during a mercenary mission. Later, Marc found himself unable to cope with his mother's death, so Steven returned and messed up Khonshu's plans. However, their hearts are still unbalanced, so they get attacked by doomed souls, who drag

Steven off the ship. Steven gets petrified by the sand, which balances their hearts, so Marc reaches the Field alone. He goes back for Steven and the two return to the mortal world. They beat Harrow and Ammit, but Marc refuses to kill Harrow, so Khonsu seemingly lets Marc and Steven go and takes his powers with him. The final episode concludes with Steven and Marc living together. However, the mid-credit scene reveals that there has been a third personality. There were moments when both Marc and Steven blacked out and could not recall what happened (including in the final fight). This alter, Jake Lockley, still abides by Khonshu, so he finds and kills Harrow under his command.

## II. Overview of *Split*'s Personalities

There are a total of 24 personalities in the system of *Split*. Only eight of them appear in the film; the others are solely names shown on a computer containing the alters' video diaries. The 2019 sequel *Glass* introduces five of them distinctively, as well as some brief appearances of other alters where it is unclear which name belongs to them (Acuna 2019). All the names – as well as images of the alters – can be found in Appendix III; this list will only include the personalities explicitly shown in *Split*.

### Core Personality

Kevin Wendell Crumb

The core personality who created the system to cope with his father's death and his mother's abuse. The alters want to protect Kevin and the system, so he has not been allowed to take dominance for years. He can be summoned by someone calling his full name. Notably, he is the only personality where the film shows his perspective; the moment he takes control is shot from his point of view. He is distraught when he learns what happened while he was gone and begs Casey to kill him, so the other alters take over and fight for control.

### The Horde / Unwanted Personalities

Dennis

Dennis is the first personality to be created by Kevin and one of the antagonists of the film. He is a stern and strong man with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder who got a glimpse of the Beast. He sets the plan in motion to summon him: convincing Hedwig to dominate over the other alters, trying to trick Dr Fletcher by pretending to be Barry, and kidnapping the girls. He works as maintenance at a zoo, where he also lives and

keeps the girls in a space underground. He needs glasses, proving Dr Fletcher's theory that people with DID can change physically depending on which personality is in control.

### Patricia

Patricia is an orderly older woman who also believes in the Beast. She acts more kind than Dennis towards Casey and her friends but does come across slightly unhinged as well.

### Hedwig

Hedwig is a child alter who helps the unwanted alters by keeping the other alters down. He sometimes crouches when he walks so that he is smaller in height, loves dubstep music and has his own room. He becomes upset when Casey uses his naivety in an attempt to escape and turns against her.

### The Beast

Dennis summons this personality by going to the train station, as Kevin's father died on a train. He is only seen by Dennis before being revealed to the audience. He acts animal-like by sprinting on all fours, growling, attacking and eating his victims, and having super strength. He can also climb on walls and has bullet-proof skin. He strongly believes that only people who have endured suffering deserve to live.

### **Other Shown Personalities**

These personalities seem to have been the dominant ones before the unwanted alters took over, as the computer screen shows their names most prominently. They only appear during their video diaries and when briefly taking control after Kevin.

## Barry

The Barry the audience gets to see at first is an impersonation done by Dennis. It is revealed that Barry is outgoing and worked in the fashion industry. He seems to have been the most dominant, letting the system function in society through him before the events of the film. He was groped by some teenage girls which upset him so much, it likely triggered the unwanted alters to take dominance. The real Barry is seen by the audience only in his emails to Dr Fletcher, in his video diary where he states his concern for the system, and when trying to calm the alters and Casey down after briefly taking control after Kevin.

## Jade

Jade is the first personality to take over after Kevin. Her video diary shows that she is a young girl with diabetes and needs insulin injections; also showing that DID can cause physical changes to the system's body.

## Orwell

A historian that also only shows up in a video diary and while fighting for control. He argues to Casey that he and the rest of the system do not approve of the actions of the unwanted alters. He also wears glasses.

### III. Character Stills

[the images of the original material have been removed here due to copyright regulations]

#### **James McAvoy in *Split***

Dennis

Patricia

Hedwig

The Beast

Kevin

Barry

Jade

Orwell

The names of all the alters (excl. the Beast) on a computer screen

**Oscar Isaac in *Moon Knight***

Steven Grant

Marc Spector

Steven Grant (colour) and Marc Spector (white)