

Article

Cringe and Sympathy: The Comedy of Mental Illness in *Flowers*

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Abstract: This article brings together findings from humor studies, especially work on cringe comedy, and disability studies. It analyzes how *Flowers* uses elements of cringe to question societal norms of the “proper person” in connection to mental illness, but also how *Flowers* broadens the genre of cringe so that, at times, it becomes a cringe tragedy rather than a cringe comedy, thus taking seriously the pain of mental illness. As a third point, this analysis focuses on the way in which *Flowers* self-reflexively employs elements of narrativity to draw attention to the cultural constructedness and stigmatization of mental illness throughout history.

Keywords: mental illness; cringe; dark comedy

1. Introduction: Comedy with a Mental Illness

The first episode of the Channel 4 series *Flowers* takes place on Deborah and Maurice Flowers’ wedding anniversary. Deborah has come out into the garden shed where Maurice, a writer of illustrated children’s books, has his work space, to talk to him about the anniversary party. He seems ready to cancel the party, “now, that no one’s coming”, while she desperately tries to think of other people they could invite. “The Becketts for example”, she tries but Maurice frowns, “the Becketts are racist”. Deborah then suggests, “that man Bill who used to come around?” Maurice considers who that might be, and then asks, “The postman?” and Deborah has to concede, “Yes, he was the postman, wasn’t he, you’re right” (S1/E1)¹

Even just five minutes into this first episode, it is clear, from their halting way of speaking, continuous small miscommunications, and Deborah’s nervous laughter, that the marriage is not going well. The scene becomes more uncomfortable when Deborah hands Maurice a small wrapped package. He unpacks a book with the title *How to Be Happy* advertising “free DVD inside” on the cover. The title (and type of self-help book), which is a cringy present under most circumstances, is made worse by the dramatic irony of the scene. Just minutes before, in the opening scene of the episode, viewers witnessed Maurice trying to hang himself. His suicide attempt failed because the tree branch onto which he tied the rope broke, which is a daring enough choice for the opening of a comedy series,² but Deborah, inside the story, is unaware of the circumstances beyond her own helplessness in the face of Maurice’s inexplicable prolonged “sadness”.

When Maurice tries to feign appreciation for her gift, she offers a wobbly smile, which is more of a grimace, and says, “I hope you didn’t get me anything”—clearly disappointed by the thought. Maurice panics and hands her the nearest thing within reach; unfortunately, the nearest thing is a large manga-sketch of a superhero with a visible erection in his spandex, the latest idea for a superhero that Shun, Maurice’s illustrator, pitched to him right before Deborah entered the shed. Maurice now pretends that he commissioned Shun to draw it for Deborah. Without question, the scene is awkward and uncomfortable, for characters and viewers alike. Together with the opening scene of Maurice’s failed suicide attempt, it sets the tone for the season. Online reviews on the series’ IMDb page describe it as having “dark themes” and as “heartbreaking” but also as “uplifting”, “utterly bonkers”,



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“bizarre”, and more than one reviewer describes their reactions as “both laughing out loud and tearing up”, at times “in one single scene” (IMDb 2016–2021).

The first season of *Flowers* was broadcast on Channel 4 beginning in April 2016. It was the television debut of Will Sharpe, who wrote and directed the series, and who plays the Japanese illustrator Shun in the series. The second season followed in June 2018, when the show also became available to US audiences via Netflix. From the beginning, the series met with success, and in the various reviews, *Flowers* was labeled a dark comedy, black comedy, sad comedy, melanchomedy, “a genre of its own”, and “cringeworthy”. The show’s narrative focuses on a dysfunctional family of four: apart from Maurice Flowers (Julian Barratt), who has become famous with his illustrated book series *Grubbs*, but who struggles with depression, and Deborah Flowers (Olivia Colman), a music teacher who is rather unhappy in her marriage to Maurice, there are the twenty-five-year-old twins—Amy and Donald (Sophia Di Martino and Daniel Rigby), who both still live at home. Amy is a musician/artist and Donald is an unsuccessful inventor—and they constantly squabble. Then there is Shun, the Japanese illustrator who moved from Japan to England to illustrate the *Grubbs* books and now lives with the Flower family.

Flowers may be difficult to pin down in terms of its exact genre, but what makes it particularly noteworthy is the way in which it brings together two recent developments in comedy. On the one hand its comedy relies frequently on elements of *cringe*, a color of comedy which has grown “steadily in popularity”, since the early 2000s (Saucke 2015, p. 2). Shows such as *The Office* (2001–2003), *The Inbetweeners* (2008–2011), or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–) all live off their prominent inclusion of awkward uncomfortable situations that bring out a “physical reaction . . . instead of shaking with laughter, we find ourselves experiencing an ‘involuntary inward shiver’” (Schwanebeck 2015, p. 108). On the other hand, it is one of an increasing number of shows that use comedy to talk about issues of mental health and neurodiversity. Maria Bamford’s *Lady Dynamite* (2016), as well as her recent stand-up special *Weakness Is the Brand*; Josh Thomas’s *Please Like Me*, which ran for four seasons from 2013 to 2016; Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag* (2016–2019); and Hannah Gadsby’s standup special from 2020: *Douglas*. These shows all pivot on awkwardness—albeit in different ways—which is also a central element of *cringe*, and they all focus on issues of mental health, such as depression, bipolar disorder, and autism. These shows are invested in exploring various connections of laughter and deep pain, as well as in using comedy to question social constructions of “normal”.

In a way, comedy in general might be predisposed as a genre for addressing the struggles of mental illness. If we think of Henri Bergson’s assertion that “the essence of the comic figure is their rigid inelasticity—their propensity, that is, to turn everything they touch into work” (Duncan 2017, p. 4)³, an inability to function smoothly within societal norms and expectations, therefore, lends itself to comedy. Beccy Collings, who focuses on the representation of physical disability in her article “British Dark Comedy Television and the Bodily Aesthetic of the Proper Person”, has argued that “dark comedy has the potential to be an empowering form that highlights disability in more diverse ways than as a state of lack in comparison with ideologically created norms” (Collings 2018, p. 73).

Director Will Sharpe has described *Flowers* as a comedy “with a mental illness” in the sense that the presence of mental illness does not impede comedy, but both co-exist (BUILD Series LDN 2018). *Flowers* employs *cringe* in conjunction with a focus on depression in Season 1 and bipolar disorder in Season 2. The series even underlines these two different states through its color palette and seasonal atmosphere, which in the first season is quite bleak and autumnal, where in the second season the colors are warmer and brighter, and the light quality is largely that of late summer. Director Will Sharpe, who is type 2 bipolar, was adamant in interviews about his desire to “get it right”⁴ in terms of “never ever” creating situations that create comedy by “laugh[ing] at the characters’ mental state, or laugh[ing] at them having a difficult time” (Sharpe and Flynn 2018). *Cringe* seems to be an apt performative choice for the topic, because, as Pansy Duncan points out, one outstanding characteristic of *cringe* is the “sheer aggregate of emotional labor evidently

demanding by [this] comic mode" (2017, p. 1), a mode that is time and again described with the phrase "it hurts to watch" (2). Duncan elaborates further, "The awkward individual, in other words, is a figure whose commitment to a mechanical, rigid line of action in a context in which flexibility and adaptability, typical of play, might be more appropriate, becomes both excruciatingly conspicuous and deeply problematic" (6). While no exact parallel can be drawn here to mental health struggles, *Flowers* frequently foregrounds, for example, the manifold failures of characters to act in ways that adhere to social norms. This is exemplified specifically by Maurice in Season 1 and Amy in Season 2, as the show's two main characters who are dealing with mental health issues. At the same time, many cringeworthy moments when characters are obliviously trampling on any social etiquette or decorum, are created by "normate"⁵ characters who presumably have no mental health issues, thus putting the idea of "normality" further into question.

Flowers uses cringe specifically to challenge normative perceptions of the "proper person" in the context of mental health issues. Despite the thin line *Flowers* walks in making audiences cringe at the inappropriateness and insensitivities characters display, it nevertheless elicits sympathy and understanding by also pushing the boundaries of cringe comedy, so that in various instances, the narrative actually tilts over into the realm of what one might call *cringe tragedy*. Moreover, *Flowers* is especially invested in tracing cultural constructions and imaginations of mental illness. This aspect is highlighted by the foregrounding of narrativity throughout the series, and especially in Season 2, which effectively blurs the line between fiction and reality.

2. *Flowers* and Cringe

The specific emphasis on its own narrativity is perhaps what most clearly separates *Flowers* from "traditional" cringe comedies. In contrast to *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, or *Borat*, *Flowers* does not adopt the format of a mockumentary, which has become the most cited incarnation of cringe (Hye-Knudsen 2018; Jacobi 2016). It also does not aim for a cinéma vérité aesthetic or break the fourth wall (Duncan 2017, pp. 3, 17n8). Instead, it seems to turn in the opposite direction. Already in the opening scene, storytelling and emplotment are foregrounded as crucial devices of the series. As Maurice walks out with the rope and a chair to the tree, a voice-over reads a passage from his children's series *Grubbs*, which, as we learn shortly thereafter, is "quite dark" and its storylines and visual aesthetics are reminiscent of American author and illustrator Edward Gorey, whose illustrated stories bear titles like *The Evil Garden* or *The Doubtful Guest* and are known for their eerie gothic style.⁶ The voice-over parallels Maurice with Mr. Grubb: "From a weird reverie of dark revelation/Mr. Grubb woke up with a strange sensation./Slipping out through the crack at the back of the lair/Trudging out through the muck and the thick-misted air/Where the colly-wobblers warbled their sinister call/and the dingle-baggles scurried on jittery claws" (S1/E1).⁷ Viewers are taken into a fairytale world rather than given the vérité illusion of a mockumentary. Nevertheless, this doubling foregrounds narrative *as* narrative and, thus, serves as an epic element of storytelling and fulfills an "anti-illusionist function" similar to the one that breaking the fourth wall fulfills in theatre (Pfister [1988] 1993, p. 71). I will return to the role of narrativity and the ways in which it serves to highlight cultural narratives about mental illness in the last section of this article. For now, it is noteworthy in terms of genre that although *Flowers* at first glance seems to move away from verisimilitude regularly employed by mockumentary-style productions to create cringe moments, the series achieves a similar effect via its use of narrativity, which is to influence the viewers' distance to the story world, its characters, and events. This fits in with Marc Hye-Knudsen's observation that cringe comedies (his example is *The Office*) "carefully regulat[e the] variable of psychological distance" (2018, p. 23), which determines "how abstractly we construe an event and therefore also our emotional response to the event" as an audience (17). While traditional embarrassment humor (for example in *Fawlty Towers*) maintains psychological distance and, therefore,

remains “conducive to amusement”, cringe comedies tend to decrease this distance and thus create the moment of vicarious embarrassment that leads to cringing (28).

Flowers creates moments of cringe by focusing on the awkwardness of social interactions and the insensitivity of what people will say, particularly Donald (Amy’s twin-brother), who, in his fragile masculinity, is constantly insulting people while unabashedly (and quite mistakenly) bragging about his own popularity, and who jealously tells Amy’s new girlfriend when she asks to see Amy, that she’s probably “about to have one of her seven daily shits” (S1/E5). There is also the moment when the whole family stands around the grandmother’s hospital bed, and the doctor tells them that “the prognosis is looking quite poor”, but Deborah keeps misunderstanding her intentions, asking, “Are you saying that to make it look worse than it is?” which the doctor negates, “I’m not doing that no”. Deborah then concludes, “Oh, so for insurance purposes, so we don’t . . . ” The nurse joins in, “She’s not doing that” and the doctor confirms again, “That’s not what I am doing”. Deborah asks, “Right, so what is it, fifty-fifty?” but the doctor keeps shaking her head, “It’s not fifty-fifty. . . . It’s very close to . . . zero”. In the ensuing silence the doctor suddenly looks up at Maurice and smiles excitedly, “Sorry, I just realized something . . . Do you write the *Grubbs* books? . . . My daughter loves *The Acorn Conundrum*” (S1/E2). Deborah’s misjudgment of the situation and the unprofessional behavior of the doctor highlight how much such situations are usually dependent on unmarked social scripts—awkwardness ensues when people depart from them in their interactions. Many of the awkward moments in the first season are, for example, created by Shun’s Japanese persona, resulting from what Adam Kotsko refers to as “an encounter between two sets of norms” (Kotsko 2010, p. 6), i.e., the pitfalls of not sharing the same set of unspoken cultural scripts. Thus, when Deborah tries to ask Shun to leave the shed so she can talk to Maurice by saying “Do you mind?”, he assures her that it’s “no problem” until she adds “as in leaving” (S1/E1). This type of awkward moment pokes fun at the laboriousness of British politeness as much as at the awkwardness that ensues from cross-cultural miscommunication.

However, *Flowers* also uses cringe moments to expose often-heard prejudices and misconceptions about mental illness. One such situation is set up when their plastic-surgeon neighbor George tells Maurice at a card game, “It’s all in the mind, of course”, presumably speaking about the game but clearly alluding to Maurice’s depression. He then dives into a story of

[o]nce [seeing] a man miss a fifty grand flush because he was too busy wallowing in toxic thoughts about his debts. If he’d just flicked that switch in his head, he could have turned his life around, but instead, he left empty-handed and wanked himself to death in a basement. . . . Three months, hiding in shame from his family. Just withered away in a flood of his own excrement and discharge”. (S1/E3)

George’s “advice” that the solution to all problems lies simply in one’s mental attitude and fortitude ties in with the ethos of Deborah’s anniversary gift—the self-help book on “How To Be Happy”—and the story he tells presents the voyeuristic sensationalist mode in which mental distress is often represented. This is exposed and countered, however, in the next moment, when Maurice asks “How do you know this person? You just sort of look at his hand over his shoulder in a casino and then follow him to the basement of his own house? Where apparently his family didn’t even know he was there for three months, even though he was masturbating constantly?” (E3). The absurdity of George’s attitude is then brought out further when he insists “the barricade in your head is an illusion created by you. It’s a question of maintenance. You are a car”, to which Morris objects “I am not a car”. George continues undeterred, “You need the right tires. The right fuel”, and Maurice repeats “I don’t need tires, because I’m not a car” (E3). The dialogical standoff between the two is funny and cringy, but Maurice’s petulant replies do serve to drive the point home that despite its antics, the show does take mental health issues seriously, and is instead ridiculing those who, without any actual knowledge of the situation offer blanket advice and clunky metaphors.

At other times, *Flowers* turns audience expectations against them when characters that one has come to expect to be flat and cartoonish suddenly show complexity. This is most impressively done with the character of Shun, who is introduced as a stereotype complete with an accent, incorrect grammar, and an overly helpful attitude. As Alison Keene points out, Shun is at first depicted as “an extreme caricature . . . that feels uncomfortably racist. Yet, Shun is played by series’ writer, director, and creator, Will Sharpe. There’s then a question whether Sharpe is purposefully leaning into the stereotypes in order to subvert them, or whether the humor is just meant to be wildly off-color” (Keene 2019). As the series progresses, however, Shun becomes a protagonist with his own complex backstory. In episode three, Maurice still has not managed to tell his family about his suicide attempt, but he confesses it to Shun, who is much better at listening than the rest of his family. They are back in the garden shed doubling as office and when Maurice asks Shun for his advice, it seems that in stereotypical fashion Shun will now provide him with some cryptic piece of wisdom, when he starts “Life is like toilet, Mr. Flowers”. The rest of his advice, creates a moment that is typical for the way in which *Flowers* uses cringe:

Sometimes you have so much rubbish in your stomach, you have gigantic poo. So huge. Of course blocking toilet. Big panic. You trying flush. Poking with a coat hanger. Use your finger. Too embarrass ask for help. My gosh, what shall I do? But to tell truth Mr. Flowers, no problem if you ask for help. Excuse me, I am have gigantic poo. Someone please help for unblock my toilet. Of course, my gosh, so smelly, everybody terrified. Such gigantic poo. So ashamed. But, help for flush is coming. (S1/E3)

While the steady repetition of “gigantic poo” and the absurdity of using it repeatedly while giving profound advice ties in with scatological humor, Shun’s metaphor of the clogged toilet hits on a basic moment of horrific embarrassment that is highly relatable. It works in a twofold way, simultaneously creating vicarious embarrassment and establishing sympathy for Maurice in that moment—for the tragedy of his embarrassment. On the surface, Shun’s metaphor may not be much better crafted than George’s comparison of human “maintenance” to that of cars, but the significant difference is that Shun validates the shame that Maurice feels when he imagines admitting his suicide attempt, while still telling him that it is okay to need help.

3. Cringe Tragedy

In the scholarly articles published on cringe humor, *The Office* is widely considered a prime example of cringe comedy. Hye-Knudsen argues that *The Office* can be read largely through the lens of “benign violation theory”, as its humor is created via situations in which what happens violates what we think should happen in such a situation, but ultimately it is “nothing to worry about” (2018, p. 15).⁸ He points out that this kind of violation can also happen in tragedy, but in tragic contexts “they are not benign and therefore elicit negative emotions instead of humour” (15). Cringe comedy, however, not only pairs violations with negative emotions, it is even “predicated on the notion that humour requires mixed emotions” (20). *Flowers*, in turn, not only uses the mixed emotions of cringe, it also purposely tilts cringe over into tragedy, into those moments that, as Keene puts it, “will absolutely rip you apart” (2019).

As mentioned above, even though *Flowers* does not employ “the immediacy of documentary realism”, it still carefully balances distance vs. closeness of the audience to the characters, like other cringe comedies. In particular, the moments in which the show seems to leave comedy behind altogether work because awkward moments are channeled into sympathy, abruptly decreasing the psychological distance between audience and characters. This happens for example in the last episode of the first season, when Deborah, who has left Maurice standing at the side of the road and checked into the hotel (where she and Maurice wanted to spend the weekend together) by herself, finds various tapes and the cassette player that Maurice packed. Curious, she takes them down with her to the hotel lounge

and begins listening to them while she waits for her pancakes. The tape she stumbles upon, however, is Maurice's taped confession of his suicide attempt.

The camera centers on Deborah, who looks rather ridiculous sitting in the hotel restaurant with an old-fashioned tape recorder and big headphones, and it is an embarrassing scene because she begins crying in public. Her face is shown in close up, which is also typical of the cringe aesthetic, which gives the viewer no option to "look away", keeping attention on her pain. As Maurice's voice on the tape says, "I tried to hang myself . . . in our garden, and I didn't know how to tell you so . . . here I am. On a fucking tape", the camera switches to Deborah's teacup, providing a close-up of her distractedly pouring milk into the tea, so that the cup overflows. The focus then switches back to her face, and she's openly crying now, tears spilling from her eyes, and trying to hold in sobs, as Maurice states that every morning his first thought is of killing himself. The embarrassment of the scene comes out of the awkwardness of her pain being exposed in a public place, in front of the other hotel guests, and her attempts to adhere to social etiquette even in this devastating moment. When the waitress who brings her pancakes, asks her, "Is everything okay?" she still tries to smile gracefully and answers, "Yes. Thank you. Sorry", even though very clearly things are not at all okay (S1/E6).

A similar situation, pivoting from cringe into tragedy occurs when Shun goes to speak to Maurice's publishers after they dropped the *Grubbs* series because Maurice is not productive enough, and tries to convince them to give them one more chance. After he has pitched idea after idea, Carol finally sighs, "Shun, we've been talking for eight hours" (S1/E5), but Shun attempts one last pitch, telling them how *Grubbs* helped him survive after losing his entire family in an earthquake. He unfolds a little illustrated booklet in front of them and begins to recount searching for his family, finally finding his little sister in a "little hole . . . but half squash. And . . . er . . . slowly I discover my whole family. Completely squash", and he smiles again, continuing, "so . . . never mind. Get little apartment in town and . . . I'm very miserable of course. Nothing left. No Money. Just tiny bread for eating". (E5). The awkwardness of the scene here results from the viewers' sympathy for Shun, which makes all the more jarring the incongruity of how he is telling the story as if it were light-hearted and tries to smile through the pain even though his voice is quivering. His way of unwittingly creating puns like "squash/squashed" and choosing inadequate idioms like "never mind" violates the audience's expectations of gravity when someone tells such a devastating story, but the awkwardness that results from it does not create a "benign" moment, but a devastating and emotional one. The emotion is heightened because Shun's character suddenly gains depth as the social distance between audience and character is suddenly decreased, playing on the audience's affects. In a way, *Flowers* uses those sentimental moments as "tragic relief" (instead of comic relief) from the tension of cringe, similar to the effects of catharsis in classical tragedy.

However, *Flowers* does not let the audience linger for too long in these moments of sympathetic relief. Alena Saucke notes that a core characteristic of cringe is that, "[b]y maintaining states of discomfort and moments of unresolved threat, cringe comedies linger in this state of irresolution, running counter to notions of comic relief" (2015, p. 44). Significantly, she adds that at the same time, however, cringe offers "opportunities of complexity for those viewers willing to engage with both the pleasure and confusion of incongruity" (44). *Flowers* plays with moments of tragedy, validating the severity of loss and psychological pain. Seemingly, this suggests that the series leaves the territory of cringe comedy behind. However, *Flowers* likewise refuses to resolve its narratives of depression and traumatic loss in a story of overcoming or the "restoration of order" which would follow in the scheme of a classical tragedy. Instead it sticks with messy complexity in its portrayal of living with mental health issues, and involves the audience in the emotional labor of those moments. Thus, when Deborah suggests to Maurice in an attempt to understand him and help him that maybe "love is how we defeat this monster, together?", Maurice answers, "Love makes it worse" (S1/E5). Similarly when Deborah gives a reading of her tell-all book about living with Maurice and his depression in Season

2, she is confronted by an angry widow who tells her, “I don’t think you have the right to tell me how it works, because I did everything I could to help Freddy, and Freddy did everything he could to help himself. And he still died” (S2/E3). Mental illness and the suffering it produces is not romanticized or used as a plot device to show that love and support conquers all. This is later reiterated by Maurice in a single sentence, “Some people get sick—Some people kill themselves” (E5). It is also an issue picked up by Sharpe himself, who explains in an interview that he wanted to connect moments of relief to the realization that “it’s not as simple as just understanding that there are problems, because they’re not necessarily going away” (BUILD Series LDN 2018). It is thus through its mixture of cringe and sympathy that *Flowers* most successfully manages to question simple stories about healing and returning to being a “proper” person in the context of mental health—and it is through its attention to storytelling itself that it frames the struggle to grapple with a complexity to which there are no easy answers.

4. Storytelling and the “Narrative Gaze”

Flowers self-reflexively foregrounds emplotment and narrativity as a significant element of its own storytelling from the beginning. It uses these stories within the stories in different ways to highlight how societies construct and maintain narratives about mental illness, which are changeable over time, but which also become part of the cultural “heritage” that is passed on. There is Maurice’s children’s book series *Grubbs*, which does not shy away from “darkness” and in this way is presented to provide an anchor point for children and adults alike when they are going through difficult times. Hugo, Deborah’s trombone pupil, buries himself in the *Grubbs* books after his parents’ divorce. Shun claims that the *Grubbs* saved his life after his family died because he found his own desperate feelings reflected in the stories. He also narrates his own loss of his family as an illustrated story. In this way, reading, writing, and storytelling are portrayed as discursive tools to work through traumatic experiences in Season 1.

Season 2 foregrounds storytelling even more, and here, narratives are used explicitly to highlight cultural constructions of mental illness. Words play a role; the terms “insane”, “crazy”, and “mad” reappear throughout both seasons. Significantly, however, many of the stories told in *Flowers* are illustrated. This is the case with *Grubbs*, with Shun’s own illustrated narrative of losing his family, and with the book that Amy “inherits” from her grandfather.⁹ It is a leather-bound illustrated book entitled *Baumgärtner*, telling the story of the family curse, which is presumably some form of “madness”. The illustrations here are of particular importance because they tie in with various cliché imagery of mental illness in Western culture. The book tells the story of Bertha, the daughter of the family, who has one yellow eye and one blue eye. Amy, who has founded her own band, named “The Pink Cuttlefish Orchestra”, tells her fellow band members, “the yellow eye was blessed and saw only wonder and beauty. But the darker one was damned and saw only misery and despair” (S2/E2). Eventually, the curse overpowers Bertha and she kills her family and burns down the castle. The book contains various images of the Baumgärtner family in elaborate regency costumes and wigs. Bertha, the “madwoman”, increasingly stands out with wild hair and an eyepatch over her dark eye. The book also contains an image of the woman wading into a body of water, the imagery and color scheme of which allude to John Everett Millais’ mid-nineteenth century painting *Ophelia* (depicting the Shakespeare character who presumably loses her mind out of grief). As Elaine Showalter has pointed out, Ophelia became a symbol of “female insanity”, and her character has been adapted to suit cultural imaginations of madness throughout the centuries (Showalter 1985, p. 80). Jennifer Eisenhauer emphasizes the significance of visualizations specifically of mental illness “born out of the larger cultural anxiety of not being able to identify a person with mental illness that feeds the desire to visualize ‘madness’ that is reflected not only in art but also within the history of science and medicine” (Eisenhauer 2008, p. 15). The storytelling device of the “curse” itself stands out as a meaning-making device to understand difference and the stigma attached to it. Eisenhauer’s observation ties in with

Simon Cross's conclusion that by the second half of the 19th century, via "the blossoming of psychiatric photography", an "iconography of madness" had developed, proliferating the idea that "one could visually identify mental illness" via the "medical gaze" (Cross 2004, p. 200). *Flowers*, while making ample use of imagery, ultimately replaces the medical gaze with the narrative gaze. Instead of delivering final assessments of "what it is like" to deal with mental illness, it taps into some narrative and representative traditions of dealing with mental illness, for example by intertwining Amy's and Maurice's mental health issues with the story of an 18th century family curse, tilting back and forth between seriousness and absurdity in ways that question notions of the "proper" and functional person, as well as blurring the line between fiction and reality.

In Season 2, Amy, whose bipolar disorder stands at the center of the season's narrative arc, increasingly seems to morph into the yellow-eyed woman from the *Baumgärtner* book as she conducts her band with equally wild movements and wild gaze. She also begins wearing an eyepatch. Moreover, as she experiences a hypomanic episode, the series includes Amy's visions in dream-like sequences, in which she and her family appear as live-versions of the regency-era illustrations. Amy becomes convinced that she is the only one who can break the *Baumgärtner* curse by composing the story into a piece of music for her band to play at the festival. As her erratic sheet music, which looks more like abstract drawings, is however largely undecipherable to her band members, she becomes increasingly agitated, and she ends up waving about a pistol in the backyard and accidentally firing it (though no one gets hurt). At first glance, the reiteration of these mad genius clichés¹⁰ seems problematic rather than thoughtful or thought provoking. However, *Flowers'* continuous engagement with fictional narratives throughout both seasons does invite the viewers to consider these cultural images of mental illness critically. Moreover, the fictional fairytale like elements are contrasted with Amy's serious discussions of her mental health with her partner Hylda (an ex-junkie and priest in her fifties who is introduced in season 2).

More important than these individual scenes is the collective effect they produce for the narrative of *Flowers*, illustrating a spectrum of ways in which people understand, misunderstand, and grapple with mental illness; that "well meaning" does not translate automatically into "not harmful"; and that clearly offensive behavior is best understood not as individual occurrences but as part of a larger matrix of cultural stigma that surrounds mental illness even in the 21st century.¹¹

At the end of the final episode, *Flowers* includes a final twist. Shun, who has been increasingly depressed and who has begun drinking heavily in the course of the second season as he grapples with the aftermath of the loss of his family and the loss of *Grubbs* as his focus, is supposed to throw Amy's pistol away. Instead, he takes it out of a drawer and walks off into the forest. It seems very likely that he intends to end his life, although this is left open by the episode. However, the last scene offers a flashback to Shun's first evening at the *Flowers'* house when, showing Maurice his illustrations, he tries to explain why he wants to work on *Grubbs*. He then tells Maurice that he feels Maurice understands "the difference". Maurice looks confused, and Shun, visibly struggling with his emotions, elaborates, "Difference: alive and dead. So small ... but if you can hold ... " (S2/E6), ending the episode, and the series on an uncertain "if".

The final note of the series is thus somber, relativizing Amy's happier ending on a positive note of reconciliation and getting help. When the credits follow, however, it is not the usual dark screen but a series of illustrations that Shun has made of the *Flowers'* family members as superheroes. This last twist, while the audience is still in the emotional space of the last scene, suggests the possibility that the entire story of *Flowers* was fiction. This might not be the conclusion most viewers draw, but the suggestion at least is clearly there, deliberately creating ambiguity rather than offering closure. Moreover, this final return to a focus on narrativity, rather than erasing the story in which audiences have been engrossed, highlights once again the cultural constructedness of mental health and mental illness via the ways in which they are represented.

5. Concluding Remarks

Margarette Gullette writes in *Aged by Culture*: “Our age narratives become our virtual realities” (Gullette 2004, p. 11), emphasizing (via the example of age) why complex and nuanced understandings of the aspects that shape our identities matter. Similarly, Garland Thompson claims, “representation structures rather than reflects reality” (Garland Thompson 2005, p. 523). *Flowers*’ inconclusive ending also takes seriously the pain of mental illness and trauma. However, in its use of cringe to create both comedy and tragedy with regard to mental illness, *Flowers* at once expands the genre of cringe comedy, instrumentalizes the awkwardness around mental illness, and takes a critical look at the ways in which cultural narratives “storify” mental illness (and disability more broadly). As a “comedy with a mental illness”, *Flowers* extends the potential of cringe to facilitate constructive and critical negotiations of mental health issues while avoiding the comforts of cathartic relief or narrative resolution. In staying with the “messy complexity” of mental health issues, the series also invites the audience to critically consider questions of narrativization and representation related to mental health and the idea of the “proper person”. *Flowers* not only recognizes the power of narratives, but also creates awareness for the distorted and stigmatizing perceptions that narratives can perpetuate, as well as their empowering potential.

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Notes

- ¹ For the remainder of this article, I will reference episodes of *Flowers* in an abbreviated form (S1/E1), indicating season and episode numbers. All episodes were accessed via the DVDs of each season (Sharpe 2016, 2018)
- ² At the same time, it is also not an unusual trope on TV. The “Bungled Suicide” has its own entry on the website tvtropes.org. In the opening episode of *Flowers*, it might be read as a genre-signaling element, marking *Flowers* as a black comedy, also because it seems to offer a nod to another comedy series which closely entangles comedy and tragedy: *Mr. Sloane*, which aired first in 2014. *Mr. Sloane*’s storyline likewise contains a failed suicide of a man whose wife is played by Olivia Colman. (I am indebted to Wieland Schwanebeck for pointing this curious parallel out to me).
- ³ Duncan paraphrases Bergson’s 2005 *Laughter: An Essay in the Meaning of the Comic* here.
- ⁴ He also worked with Mind, a mental health charity in England and Wales, which works to offer support to people, as well as to educate and raise public awareness for mental health issues, to assure that his depictions were accurate (Keene).
- ⁵ A term introduced by Rosemarie Garland Thompson to refer to the “unmarked, prototypical subject, the ‘unblemished’ one” (Garland Thompson 1997, p. 40)
- ⁶ In an interview with Stephen Schiff, Gorey insisted that his stories were not so much gothic as they were nonsense in the tradition of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. He argued that “[i]f you’re doing nonsense it has to be rather awful, because there’d be no point . . . Sunny, funny nonsense for children—oh, how boring, boring, boring. As Schubert said, there is no happy music. And that’s true, there really isn’t. And there’s probably no happy nonsense either” (Schiff 1992, p. 89). Funnily enough, Maurice’s publishers in *Flowers* are named Carol and Carroll.
- ⁷ The allusion to Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky* is obvious here.
- ⁸ The example Hye-Knudsen uses is the moment in which David Brent is fired in the last episode of season 2 of the *The Office* when Brent begins to cry and begs his bosses to let him have his job back (2018, p. 23).
- ⁹ Amy is given the book in Episode 1 of Season 2, together with a whole suitcase of things that belonged to her magician grandfather by Wendy, a former partner of Felix Baumgärtner (who changed his name to Flowers when he came to England because the German sounded too much like bum gardener).
- ¹⁰ Amy, who is struck by lightning in the last episode of Season 1, for example, receives the nickname “lightning” from her fellow band-members in season two, and the local newspaper also calls her “the local lightning bolt” (S2/E1).
- ¹¹ One shortcoming of the world-of-its-own atmosphere of *Flowers* is the fact that because none of the *Flowers* characters seem to have any substantial connections to an “outside” world (no one has cellphones for example and the tape recorder is the most modern technology introduced), it seems questionable whether the series is capable of any more wide-reaching systemic critique of the stigma of mental illness. Via the figures of Maurice and Amy, however, a critical focus on the ways in which mental illness is culturally evaluated based on productivity is included, though in a relatively subdued way. One contrast that does stand out though, between the seasons, is that Maurice is dropped by his publishers because his depression renders him unable to be productive, while Amy, during her hypomanic episode, is portrayed as obsessively productive. Yet while such obsessive

productivity of the “mad genius” has frequently been romanticized, in the end she decides not to perform with her band at the festival in Omsk but instead to put her health first.

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