

Benna's Reality

In the novel *Anagrams* by Lorrie Moore, the main character, Benna, struggles with understanding things for what they really are. Benna, who takes up a new persona with every chapter, always ends up sad and alone. In order for Benna to cope with the harsh realities in her life, she creates stories and people in her head to lessen her sorrows and keep herself company. The most prominent problems in Benna's life are her childlessness, pessimism, and her delirious approach to reality. Benna is incapable of coping healthily, therefore causing her inability to see things for what they really are.

Georgianne, Benna's imaginary daughter, represents the largest theme throughout *Anagrams*—Benna's struggle with childlessness. Benna cannot process the toll that her empty womb takes on her mentally, emotionally, and physically. The speaker's grapple with childlessness is present in almost everything she says. She explains, "My nose has gone numb. Though it's sunny for November, my nose has gone cold as meat. I touch the tip and it feels not like a nose but like a strange fleshy bump, like a cervix through a diaphragm, a distant knob" (162). Benna's nose being cold is an undesirable situation just like her undesirable situation of not having had children. Her cold nose reminds her of a diaphragm, a form of birth control, which pushes at the constant ticker in her head reminding her that she is completely alone. This loneliness is ever present throughout the novel, yet Benna never truly acknowledges or faces these feelings; she simply creates imaginary friends and hides from reality to escape her emotions.

The pressure of society and the pressure of her biological womanhood to have children haunts her. Society is not easy on an older woman without children. Every

person Benna meets and observes enforces the sorrow and loneliness she carries by not having a child. While Benna is an aerobics instructor for the elderly, she expresses the difficulty she has facing the older women that have everything she wants: “grandchildren, stability, a postmenopausal grace, some mysterious, hard won truce with men. They had, finally, the only thing anyone really wants in life: someone to hold you hand when you die” (27). Even the children that Benna create in her head question her childlessness:

My new apartment might be a place where there are lots of children. They might gather on my porch to play, and when I step out for groceries, they will ask me, ‘Hi, do you have any kids?’ and then, ‘Why not, don’t you like kids?’ ‘I like kids, I will explain. ‘I like kids very much.’ And when I almost run over them with my car, in my driveway, I will feel many different things (53).

The imaginary children, just by asking simple questions, upset and enrage Benna enough to want to seriously injure them. The mix of emotions she mentions at the end probably consists of fear of never having children, sorrow for not having a child or a husband yet, rage because she wants a child but does not have one, and anxiousness that she is running out of time. Instead of Benna consoling herself with ideas of a happy life without children, she bullies herself into feeling even worse.

Even Benna’s body betrays her because she is ignoring her biological purpose of bearing children. At one point, Benna finds a lump in her breast that could be cancerous. After seeing a doctor, Benna shares, “the nurse-practitioner told me that if I had a child it might straighten out my internal machinery a bit. Prevent ‘Career Women’s Diseases.’ Lumps often disappear during pregnancy” (21). Benna’s body is literally becoming cancerous because she has not had a child. Her body is betraying her and forcing her into a state of fragility and anxiousness. This adds to her fear of never having a child or a family, and in effect, adds to her inability to positively cope with her situation.

In order for Benna to cope with her desire to have children and the pressures to have children, Benna does what she does best, she creates Georgianne, an imaginary daughter for herself. This imaginary daughter is a combination of Benna's dead husband, George, and her niece who she never sees, Ann. By creating a daughter in her mind, Benna can compensate for all of her childless worries, sorrows, and anxieties. It also compensates for all the lives she could have grown and nurtured. As Benna's somewhat-motto goes, "Life is sad. Here is someone" (98). Benna is unable to clearly see what she really has, what she really wants, and how to realistically obtain what she desires. Benna is unable to cope with the reality of her life and the heartache that plagues her. Therefore, she creates imaginary people and rearranges everything in front of her, changing things to create her own reality in order to cope.

Benna is incapable of seeing the reality of things even when she wants to. She automatically rearranges and adds things in her life with her imagination to create the "reality" that she wants to live in. This mindset is reflected in her playfulness with anagrams. Benna explains early in the novel,

There was a period where I kept trying to make anagrams out of words that weren't anagrams: *moonscape* and *menopause*; *gutless* and *guilts*; *lovesick* and *evil louse*...I would scribble the words over and over again on a napkin, trying to make them fit—like a child dividing three into two, not able to make it go" (Moore 17).

Benna cannot play by the rules, whether that be in a game of anagrams or in life. She is constantly adding and changing letters (people, things, situations) in order for things to seem the way she wants them to. This idea is furthered when Benna shares an attempt to connect with the world and others, but fails. Benna explains, "Even walking I am disoriented. I must get outside myself, I must extend myself, communicate with the

world. I stare at a squirrel up ahead and, without thinking, call, ‘Here, kitty-kitty’” (162). The phrase “without thinking” expresses that it is second nature for Benna to respond to something as if it were something else i.e. her referring to the squirrel as a cat. She cannot hold on to the reality that everybody else lives in. Benna may have, at first, been simply unwilling to see things as they are, but somewhere along the way she lost her sense of the real world and now is completely unable to see the truth of things.

Benna’s imaginative thinking is also represented in the first four chapters of the novel. The first four chapters are all different stories that add and change characters with each new story, as if they were letters in an anagram. Benna rearranges the perspective, the lives of the characters, and situations that occur. By doing so, Benna is able to step outside of herself and create a different world where she could come out happy and on top. Unfortunately, even though she has the opportunity to create an ideal world for herself, she inevitably ends up sad and alone by the end of each chapter. Due to Benna’s inability to cope healthily with harsh realities and life in general, she creates a new world and new characters for herself in order to survive, causing her to melt into a completely different reality, therefore mistaking even the simple things as something else.

Benna’s extreme pessimism and blasé outlook on life adds to the harshness of her reality. Benna struggles in her attempts to participate in the real world, which causes her to identify with a young girl fighting to roller skate. Benna shares,

A girl is trying to roller skate in the big chunky gravel of her driveway and can’t. She stumbles around, an image of all the impossibilities of everyone’s life, ridiculous and heartbreaking. I used to do that, skate around like that in the driveway and fall, stones sticking in the pus of my scraped knees, like something necessary” (162).

This passage is a perfect metaphor for Benna's attitude toward life. Benna had a difficult childhood. She always tried her hardest to do as she was told but as she grew up, she found a solution to trying and failing—she simply gives up. The rock brutally lodged in the young girl's knee represents that no matter what Benna does or how hard she tries, there will always been pain, suffering, and misery in her life. Therefore, why try at all?

Benna's pessimism kills her desire to try and relate to the real world because "[t]hings...rarely happen the way you [understand] them. Mostly they just sort of [drive] up alongside what you thought was the case and then [move] randomly down some other way (33). Benna refuses to face reality because things never turn out how she believes they should. However, it is interesting to note that even in Benna's created world, things don't work out happily and things still disappoint her, but her indifferent outlook on life protects her from facing her true emotions. In order for Benna to have any sort of control, she stops depending on the world and others and starts depending on herself. Benna detaches herself from reality and creates her own, including an imaginary best friend named Eleanor and her imaginary daughter, Georgianne.

In conclusion, Benna is a sad woman with no one to hold her hand when she dies. Her sadness consumes her and forces her to construct people who care for her and give her life purpose. Eleanor, Georgianne, and other manipulations of Benna's world are coping mechanisms. Without these manipulations, Benna would be lost in a reality where no one understands her, leaving her in a disconnected state of solitude. Due to Benna's inability to cope healthily, her mind plays games with her, causing her to never truly see the reality of things. Life is sad, here is someone.

Work Cited

Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Print.