

The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue: Portrayals of Stuttering in Film, Television, and Comic Books

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THERE IS A WELL-ESTABLISHED TRADITION WITHIN THE ENTERTAINMENT and publishing industries of depicting mentally and physically challenged characters. While many of the early renderings were sideshowesque amusements or one-dimensional melodramas, numerous contemporary works have utilized characters with disabilities in well-rounded and nonstereotypical ways. Although it would appear that many in society have begun to demand more realistic portrayals of characters with physical and mental challenges, one impediment that is still often typified by coarse caricatures is that of stuttering. The speech impediment labeled stuttering is often used as a crude formulaic storytelling device that adheres to basic misconceptions about the condition. Stuttering is frequently used as visual shorthand to communicate humor, nervousness, weakness, or unheroic/villainous characters. Because almost all the monographs written about the portrayals of disabilities in film and television fail to mention stuttering, the purpose of this article is to examine the basic categorical formulas used in depicting stuttering in the mainstream popular culture areas of film, television, and comic books.¹ Though the subject may seem minor or unimportant, it does in fact provide an outlet to observe the relationship between a physical condition and the popular conception of the mental and personality traits that accompany it.

One widely accepted definition of stuttering is, “the interruption of the flow of speech by hesitations, prolongation of sounds and blockages sufficient to cause anxiety and impair verbal communication” (Carlisle 4).

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This cumbersome and unwieldy definition does not prevent a substantial majority of the population from believing they understand the concept of stuttering.² Most people know someone who stutters, it is estimated that there are around fifty million stutterers worldwide (Shell 1). It is a condition that is rarely viewed as either mysterious or extraordinary but rather often seen as a mundane and trivial ailment. Possibly because stuttering is relatively common and because it involves a “simple” aspect of everyday life (speaking) theories abound among the laity about the probable causes and cures of the malady. Stuttering is often attributed to nervousness or weakness and cures such as “breathe differently,” “speak slower,” or “snap your fingers when you talk” are prescribed routinely by helpful listeners. This familiarity and perceived understanding of the speech impediment has been transferred to popular culture outlets where stuttering characters have long been included. Unfortunately, the portrayals of these characters have often pandered to the public’s basic ideas of stuttering and thus have been stereotypical, unrealistic, and at times even derogatory.³

The oldest and most basic portrayal of stuttering in film and television is that of the simple comedic device or gag. This characterization follows a long theatrical tradition in which a physical, mental, emotional, ethnic, or social condition is lampooned in order to provide low-level comedy. The basis for this type of character is the need to provide lighter moments that are esthetically or viscerally humorous. Often these roles are created to showcase a malady or humorous oddity much in the tradition of Barnumesque sideshows. Examples of these are cowboy sidekicks with “funny” voices or mannerisms like Gabby Hayes, the racial/ethnic “other” in the vein of Jack Benny’s Rochester or the Green Hornet’s Kato, or the physically challenged such as the visual impaired Mister Magoo. The most notable fictional comic stutterer is undoubtedly the Warner Brothers cartoon character Porky Pig. Created in 1935, Porky Pig is a severe stutterer who often is lampooned because of his speech impediment. In Porky’s 1935 debut *I Haven’t Got a Hat* he fails to recite “The Ride of Paul Revere” to the amusement of the audience while in the 1938’s *Porky’s Poppa* he becomes so enraged after hearing himself speak that he smashes the phonograph on which his voice is being played. Additionally, Porky’s words often become so entangled that he is forced to replace words or phrases or even stop speaking though the viewer knows what he wishes to say. These and many other examples, along with Porky’s signature

“Th-Th-That’s all folks,” seem to indicate that a sizable number of people find Porky’s stuttering amusing. Porky is mainly a reactionary character in his films and often his scenes are chances for the audience to hear the cartoon pig “talk funny.” In 1987 researcher Gerald Johnson conducted a clinical analysis of Porky’s stuttering and determined that the animated swine was disfluent on a rather high 23% of his words and displayed atypical and exaggerated characteristics of stuttering (235–38). In other words, not surprisingly one of Porky’s main purposes is to be funny when he speaks and to be an easy auditory gag for those who find stuttering humorous.

Porky Pig is far from the only example of stuttering being used for humorous effect in popular culture. Mel Tillis (a real life stutterer) uses his speech to create lowbrow comedy in films like *Cannonball Run*, *The Villain*, and *Smokey and the Bandit II*. While *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), starring Humphrey Bogart, contains this dialogue about stuttering:

Gangster: “You’ve got a smart answer for everything don’t you?”
Sam Spade: “What do you want me to do, learn to stutter?”

Again, this comic tradition seems to be used with characters that stutter because on a foundational level stuttering is funny to many. To some it is amusing to think of the smooth-talking Bogart fighting for words and arriving at a less than “smart” answer. Equally funny is the idea that the loquacious Sam Spade would voluntarily teach himself to stutter. Another example of pithy comedic dialogue about stuttering is the 1956 film *The Court Jester*, in which comedian Danny Kaye becomes involved in an elaborate ruse and pretends to interpret the sign language of his supposedly deaf granddaughter. During one exchange the woman gives a lengthy sign answer that is interpreted by Kaye as merely, “no.” When asked why it took so many hand signs for such a short answer Kaye responds, “she stutters” (Kuster). It seems that the implication that a person can stutter while “speaking” with her hands is amusing. Additionally, a recent episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* features a man who stutters and wishes to park in handicap parking because of his disability (“HBO: Curb Your Enthusiasm”). Here the debate over stuttering’s significance provides an opportunity for base level humor. No matter if one finds such low-brow comedy to be entertaining or not, it cannot be denied that this device is an important element in many films and television shows.⁴ It is significant that when

used as a comic element the stutterer is not a true representation of a person but rather is the physical embodiment of his speech impediment. His only purpose is to stutter and thus amuse. In this context a stutterer's narrative role is to provide light-hearted moments and then exit so that the more important characters can fill the screen.

The stutterer as comic relief is an important narrative device in popular media but certainly not the only one. Likely, the most common way in which stuttering is used in visual media is to easily display that a character is weak or nervous. This storytelling shorthand has developed out of the popular misconception that stuttering is a sign of weakness. Experts, like author Barry Guitar, assert that, "research has shown that most people, even classroom teachers and speech-language pathologists, stereotype people who stutter as tense, insecure, and fearful" (Guitar 17). Because many in the general public already believe stutterers to be anxious, unconfident, and timid then writers need not spend precious time explaining that a character possesses these traits, they instead assume the audience will make the mental leap from the speech impediment to the weak behaviors in which it is associated. Examples of this characterization of weakness abound probably because it is such an easy and popular association with stuttering. One interesting example of this depiction of stuttering is the character of Lieutenant Reginald Barclay in the popular science fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In the futuristic world of *Star Trek*, Barclay is a nervous and socially inept starship engineer. Barclay is shown to be a shy hypochondriac, who fears the ship's transporters (a common method of transportation on the show) and is so uncomfortable with people that he would rather interact with computer-simulated characters. In early episodes featuring Barclay a young character, Wesley Crusher, nicknames him "Lieutenant Broccoli" in order to emphasize his limitations ("Reginald Barclay"). In addition to the Barclay's other shortcomings he also stutters. On a starship filled with courageous and often heroic personnel the one character that is shown to have multiple anxieties and weaknesses is also the one who stutters. Contrast this depiction to that of the chief engineer, Geordi La Forge, who happens to be blind. La Forge's blindness is partially overcome, by a device called a VISOR that allows him to see in a different way than his crewmates. Throughout the series La Forge is shown to be capable and heroic and his blindness is often depicted as a beneficial quality as in episode #113 "The Masterpiece Society" in which

La Forge's VISOR helps to save a doomed colony ("Star Trek: the Next Generation"). Other physical disabilities are also portrayed positively, an example being a hearing-impaired character in the episode entitled "Loud as a Whisper" in which a deaf mediator is revered for his strong character and excellent communication skills ("Star Trek.com"). Barclay's stuttering is never portrayed as noble or even mentioned aloud; instead it serves to reinforce his weak nature. Barclay is not a person who stutters but is rather a shy, backward, phobic person; and stuttering is a symptom of these things. In an episode of *Star Trek Voyager* a possible future version of Barclay is shown as confident, assertive and nonstuttering. The apparent message being that when he overcomes his fears and shyness Barclay also stops stuttering ("Reginald Barclay").

Probably the most famous motion picture to invoke images of a nervous and weak stutterer is the 1988 comedy *A Fish Called Wanda*. In this film Michael Palin plays Ken Pile, a hitman who stutters. Throughout the movie a thief named Otto West, played by Kevin Kline, who constantly makes fun of his stuttering, torments Ken. Otto repeatedly mocks Ken's speaking and often imitates his stuttering. Although Ken is a professional hitman he is also a soft-hearted animal lover that routinely cannot find the courage to defend himself against Otto's taunts. As the film draws to a close Otto and Ken engage in a final showdown and Otto still ridicules Ken by exclaiming, "It's K-K-K- Ken, coming to k-k-kill me" (*A Fish Called Wanda*). Eventually Ken attempts to kill Otto by running over him with a large motor vehicle and finds that this act of violence and revenge has cured his stuttering. In essence Ken finds that although this action is morally questionable, it is indeed an act of strength and this means that he is no longer a weak person. As his weak characteristics disappears so does his stuttering that served as a sign of the person he is no longer. As a hitman Ken has always been a murderer but because now he can murder people for personal reasons he has gained potency, which makes his stuttering unnecessary.

Examples of the characterization of stuttering as weakness and its contrast with the strength of action abound in films and television. 1998's *The Waterboy* is the tale of a shy, socially backward young man from Louisiana who becomes the hero of a small university's football team. In order to play football, the hero, Bobby Boucher, acted by Adam Sandler, must channel all his aggression from years of being teased about many things including his stuttering. On the playing

field Bobby is the quintessential tough, aggressive, strong male that no longer stutters because he is no longer weak. In the same vein is a wrestling character that has appeared in both *Extreme Championship Wrestling* and *World Wrestling Entertainment* name Buh Buh/Bubba Ray Dudley. Although not physically weak, Bubba Ray suffers the taunts of his opponents who make fun of his backwoods background and his stuttering. Bubba Ray stutters so badly that he is unable to pronounce his name until an opponent hits him in the chest with a crutch. This action "toughens up" Bubba Ray and allows him to lose his stutter. Because Bubba Ray has become a "real man" he no longer suffers from stuttering ("Talk Wrestling"). In the comic book *The Sandman* a weak stuttering version of the biblical character Abel inhabits the Dream Lord's realm. Abel is portrayed as a nervous cowardly character that is constantly being murdered by his compulsive, aggressive, and overbearing brother Cain. Abel does little to stop this cycle of violence and instead allows Cain to do as he wishes. In the film *Primal Fear* (1996) Edward Norton plays a murderer that pretends to have multiple personalities in order to receive a courtroom acquittal. The "weaker" personality Aaron stutters badly and is contrasted to Roy, a dominant and violent personality that speaks fluently. When Norton becomes Roy his power is not only demonstrated in the words he uses but also in his fluency. Similarly, in the film (and book) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* the villain Professor Quirrell feigns stuttering in order to appear weaker and thus not be suspected of his crimes. Quirrell appears to be nervous, timid, and rather harmless and his stuttering showcases these traits. When he stops pretending to be meek, Quirrell also stops stuttering, and is shown to be a powerful villain. In the novel, on which the film is based, when asked about his criminal ways Quirrell states "... who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?" (209).

One additional example of stuttering signifying weakness can be found in the John Wayne film *The Cowboys* (1972). In the film John Wayne hires a group of young men to work on a cattle drive. One of the boys (about age 10) clearly stutters and as the film progresses an accident takes place that forces the boy to come to the John Wayne character for help. The boy is so shaken that he is unable to speak fluently and when it becomes clear what has happened John Wayne verbally abuses him and tells him that he can talk normally if he wishes to. The exchange is as follows,

Wayne—"You almost let your friend drown out there in that river."
Kid—"I'da rather d-d-died then do that."
Wayne—"And you're a liar!"
Kid—"It ain't my fault I stutter."
Wayne—"Listen to me, you whining little welt. You're gonna stop that stuttering or get the hell out of here. You're gonna stop it or go home, do ya hear me?"
Kid—"Son of a bitch!"
Wayne—"What did you say?"
Kid—"You Goddamned son of a bitch!"
Wayne- "Say that again."
Kid—"You Goddamned mean son of a bitch."
Wayne—"Say it faster."
Kid—"You Goddamned mean dirty son of a bitch."
Wayne—"Wouldn't make it a habit calling me that, son."

Miraculously, this violent verbal outburst cures the boy and he does not stutter again in the film. Many speech therapists would argue that John Wayne's stuttering therapy was in fact the opposite of how the situation should be handled. Most clinicians report that bouts of disfluency should be dealt with in a patient and understanding manner. In fact, in an essay written in rebuttal to the film, Hans-Georg Basshardt notes that John Wayne's therapy would likely make a stutterer less fluent by making him more anxious and struggle more (Basshardt). Wayne's message to the young stutterer was the same as in all the above-mentioned films, that stutterers stutter because of weakness and fear. The morale of the films is that if the stutterer becomes stronger and more in charge of his life then he can stop his stuttering. Like Oedipus blinding himself so that he could truly see, the disappearance of stuttering reflects a symbolic change within a character. No longer should he be seen as weak or passive but rather he has now overcome those difficulties and can be viewed with respect and approval.

Because stuttering is often used as visual shorthand for weakness, characters that stutter are rarely cast in the role of the hero. The archetypal hero must be strong and confident and those qualities are often lacking among stutterers in visual media. Revisiting the relationship between the stutterer and John Wayne in the film *The Cowboys*, it is unimaginable that the roles could be reversed. Although many speech disfluency experts like Hans-Georg Basshardt argue that John Wayne handled the situation incorrectly, one cannot envision a scenario in which the stuttering boy argues this point and wins. John

Wayne in this motion picture, and most of the others he starred in, is the quintessential American hero. He is strong, rugged, and assertive; the classic man of action. Notice that Wayne equates stuttering with a moral deficiency. In his mind the kid will not stop stuttering because he does not have the will to do so. The young man is too lazy, weak willed, or selfish to make a change and is lying to himself and those around him by claiming his stuttering is not his fault. Wayne accepts the kid's stuttering, and the moral failings that come with it, so long as it does not harm the group, but once an innocent is endangered Wayne acts. In doing so Wayne behaves as the hero by not allowing the selfishness and denial of an individual to potentially harm the whole. The educated viewer knows that the kid is right, his stuttering is not a mental light switch that can be flipped off and on, but that matters little because he does not possess the important elements that would allow him to defeat John Wayne in a battle of wits. Wayne is the motion picture's hero and there is little chance that a stuttering child will be allowed to best him in a contest of any kind. The writers only allow the kid to verbally retaliate against Wayne because it proves that Wayne was correct in his assessment of the proper cure for the kid's speech impediment. Even when the kid acts boldly in a manner that Wayne wishes by cursing at him Wayne is certain to keep the upper hand by warning the kid about his language. In this film, like many others, stuttering is a deficiency that prevents a character from ever being seen as a true hero.

In the world of comic books the distinction between hero, villain and supporting cast is often well defined. In general, like motion pictures, comic books have tightly structured rules as to what constitutes a hero. Much like a John Wayne cowboy, comic book heroes are usually strong, confident, aggressive, and morally superior. They are men and women of action who overcome outside evils and internal flaws. Often their secret identities have a physical defect or weakness but traditionally none of these imperfections manifest themselves while the superhero identity is present. Clark Kent may be near-sighted, clumsy and bumbling but Superman is not. Freddy Freeman is a physically handicapped newsboy but Captain Marvel Jr. is a supremely powerful being. Likewise, Marvel comic's version of the Norse god Thor shows no sign of the paralyzed leg that his alter ego possesses. These impediments, much like stuttering, are unheroic and only serve as guidelines to what a hero is not. Like the above-mentioned handicaps,

stuttering is used as an example of an unheroic trait in the Marvel comic's hero known as Cloak. The hero's origin story states that Tyrone Johnson is a teenage runaway who lives in New York City. Tyrone leaves home because he feels responsible for his best friend Billy's death. At ages seventeen Tyrone and Billy witness a robbery and murder. When the police arrive Tyrone stutters so violently that he is unable to tell that Billy did not commit the crime. When Billy is fatally shot by one of the officers Tyrone blames himself for being unable to speak to the authorities and defend his friend. At this point Tyrone is the antithesis of the hero. His mental weakness and physical frailty prevent him from saving his best friend's life. Tyrone cannot live with the guilt and drops out of society. Eventually through a series of convoluted events he and a wealthy female runaway are given superpowers and turn to fighting crime ("Marvel Comics"). When Tyrone receives his powers, and becomes the hero Cloak, he no longer stutters but instead speaks fluently and his words are often displayed in dark bold print to make them seem more aggressive and authoritative.⁵ In this text the very symbol of Tyrone's weakness is his stuttering, it was what prevents him from being a hero and what he blames for ruining his life. Tyrone is incapable of being a hero while he stutters; the two things are in such conflict that heroic actions are inconceivable. When Tyrone gains superpowers he transforms into another person that is heroic, aggressive, and does not stutter. As Tyrone's weakness departs so does his stuttering and at this point he is capable of being a true hero.

Both of the examples of stutterers' inability to be heroic in visual media have focused on the way that stuttering prevented a character from performing a heroic act. In each case the person who stuttered was unable to "do the right thing" in a life or death situation. Sometimes the heroism in a visual narrative comes not from a single act but rather from a job done well. Such is the case in *My Cousin Vinny*, a 1992 film about a New York lawyer (Joe Pesci) defending two youths accused of murder in the southern United States. Although Pesci's character seems incompetent throughout the motion picture, in the end he proves himself to be a good lawyer by finding evidence that acquits the defendants. Pesci is poorly trained, ill-mannered, and unprofessional but becomes the hero of the film by using trickery, self-confidence, and verbal blustering. In contrast, Austin Pendleton plays a public defender that is briefly assigned to the case and at first seems lawyerly in

every way. He is well dressed and groomed, understands the intricacies of the law, and seems to be an altogether better lawyer than Pesci. When the two lawyers enter the courtroom though, Pesci proves to be a skilled cross-examiner, while Pendleton stutters severely and has difficulty asking any questions. In this moment Pesci proves himself to be the film's hero and Pendleton becomes an also-ran that is never seen again. Pendleton is better trained, more knowledgeable, and undoubtedly has more legal experience than Pesci. Pendleton has been hired as a public defender while Pesci has never tried a case before and has just passed the New York state bar exam on the sixth try. This matters little though because the sight of Pendleton stuttering reveals his weakness, incompetence, and his inability to be heroic. No matter how well trained he may be, a stuttering lawyer is too weak, vulnerable, and amusing to be the hero and win the big case.

Stuttering is often depicted for base amusement, to portray weakness or to contrast and define heroic qualities. Additionally, it sometimes serves as a brand that marks a villain. Narrative tradition is rife with examples of disfigured or deformed evildoers ranging from Peter Pan's Captain Hook to latter-day Bond villains. Like the deformities used with these characters, stuttering is sometimes used to portray a physical defect that hints at a greater moral or spiritual deformity. A villain's stuttering helps relay to the audience there is something sinister about him. Such is the case in several television crime dramas including *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *Criminal Minds*. Mandy Patinkin plays Jason Gideon, a genius FBI profiler, who has the knack for being able to solve difficult cases in CBS's *Criminal Minds*. In an ongoing storyline, Patinkin is tracking a serial murder known as the Footpath Killer. After hearing that the killer likes to surprise his victims in isolated places and physically overpower them, Patinkin concludes that the killer must be a stutterer. In his professional opinion, stuttering would cause the murderer to act in such a way because it would make him incapable of verbally beguiling would-be victims. Although there would seem to be a multitude of alternative explanations, Patinkin is nonetheless right and eventually catches the killer because he recognizes the telltale stutter. Throughout the storyline it is clear that the agents are not merely looking for a criminal that stutters but that his stuttering is a part of his criminal makeup. Like the Victorian concept of a criminal class, the Footpath Killer's stuttering marks him physically as a delinquent. Within this context stuttering is

an unnatural perversion that signals a moral/spiritual deficiency. The Footpath Killer's stuttering proves that something evil exists within him. In this context the criminal is not someone who has committed a crime but he is a person whose nature is to commit crimes. His stuttering is the mark that his animalistic criminal impulses make him unfit for society and is a danger to all those around him. While other visual genre characters stutter to be funny, to display weakness, or to be unheroic, characters like the Footpath Killer stutter to prove they are unnatural.

A character similar to *Criminal Minds's* Footpath Killer is *CSI's* Paul Milander, a murdering sociopath that has appeared in multiple episodes including the pilot. Milander is a brilliant criminal who plays a game of cat and mouse with the *CSI's* as the tally of murder victims steadily increases. Eventually, Gil Grissom, the lead *CSI* investigator, is able to deduce that Milander is a murderer because of a line of evidence that revolves around his stuttering. Once again, as with the Footpath Killer, Milander's stuttering marks him as unnatural and evil. He is the opposite of the clean, efficient, law observing *CSIs* who process his case. His stuttering is an outward manifestation of an inward evil. Unlike the Footpath Killer, Milander displays other more aberrant behaviors like manipulating his victims' lives and toying with the authorities, but our passage into his inner deviancy is the discovery of his stuttering. Notice, that both these television crime dramas profess to be concerned with the mastery of science over superstition and ignorance but their handling of stuttering and criminals does not work within this overall focus. Both programs have chosen to portray stuttering not as a physical characteristic or impediment but rather as a sign of a greater evil.

Television is not the only visual media that has portrayed stuttering as a sinister brand. As mentioned before, films often present physical deformities or maladies as representations of evil. One such motion picture is 1991's *Dead Again*, a neo-film noir about a reincarnated murderer and victim. Throughout the film, the audience is led to speculate at the relationship between the two main characters, played by Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson, and encouraged to guess which was victim and murderer in a past life. Branagh is the prime suspect throughout the film but in the end it is revealed that a minor character in fact committed the crime. While Branagh's and Thompson's characters have been reincarnated, their current

hypnotist was a young boy named Frankie that in their past lives had a severe stutter and committed the brutal murder. The older present day, Frankie does not stutter throughout the film until he is unmasked as the murderer. When his criminal ways become evident so does his stuttering. Unlike the villains in *CSI* and *Criminal Minds*, Frankie is able to disguise his true nature and thus “cure” his stuttering. When his criminal behavior is revealed though, he can no longer lie about his unnatural makeup and the return of his stuttering showcases his downfall.

While crime stories in television and films sometimes portray stutters as inhuman criminals, comic books extend this idea and often invent evil stuttering villains that have nonhuman/animalist characteristics. In comic books, unlike films or television, it is a widely accepted practice that villains are evil by nature so they must be dehumanized further by being given physical/mental impediments and often being linked to animalistic traits. As Marc Shell discusses in his monograph *Stutter* there is a long history of animals that stutter in literature and films but generally these animals are not categorized as evil. Comic books uniquely fuse animalistic personas/behaviors with impediments like stuttering to create a subhuman predator. Unlike the television and film criminal, the comic book villain does not stutter to mark himself as inhuman, his animal-like abilities showcase that, rather he stutters to display that his wildness makes him less than human. Like villains, many comic book superheroes possess superpowers based on animal traits, Aquaman, Animal Man, Beast Boy, etc., but heroes use their abilities to control and civilize nature. Instead of becoming animalistic and cruel, heroes use their powers to elevate themselves and society and thus become “kings of the jungle” in a Tarzan-like manner. Conversely, villains with animal-like superpowers or accelerated abilities do not rise above nature but rather sink into its depths and become subhuman. Stuttering marks and notes this lack of humanity and displays that the villain’s powers control him instead of him controlling them. The comic book narratives seem to state that a person that cannot manage a simple act like speaking cannot be expected to manage abilities beyond the dreams of most humans. Accordingly, a character that stutters lacks the self-control to elevate himself above his base wants and desires. Multiple examples of this exist. Animal-Master, a criminal circus trainer who attempts to defeat Aquaman while stuttering out threats (“Aquaman Duels the

Animal-Master"). Peepers, an evil stuttering mutant with exceptional visual abilities that does not take an animal identity but possesses superpowers that suggest animal-like dexterity. Additionally, multiple villains possessing snake-like powers have spoken with an elongated "s-s-s" stutter in an attempt to mimic a serpent's hiss. These villains, and others like them, were crafted as stutterers to emphasize animalistic weakness rather than their human strengths.

While many visual media portrayals of characters that stutter have resorted to comic or negative stereotypes others have attempted to present stutterers positively. The most common seemingly positive way that stuttering is showcased is when a storyline is crafted that aims to teach the audience how to behave. These narrative versions of public service announcements often attempt to educate and promote understanding. Although these storylines can be about any number of subjects, stuttering has been singled out multiple times. Among the most notable is an episode of the popular television show *M*A*S*H* entitled "Run for the Money" (1982) in which Charles Emerson Winchester (David Ogden Stiers) befriends a patient that stutters. Winchester attempts to convince the young soldier that stuttering does not make him unintelligent or inferior and eventually the young man that stutters gains a higher degree of self-respect. It is revealed at the end of the episode that Winchester's sister also stutters. Likewise, in two different episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* ("The Music Box" (1977) and "No Beast so Fierce" (1982)) children that stutter are taunted but later lessons about proper behavior toward others are learned. Furthermore, in *Justice League of America* #36 (1965) each of the team's superheroes become handicapped: Superman goes blind, Green Arrow loses his arms, the Flash has only one leg, Hawkman develops asthma, and Green Lantern begins to stutter. Evidentially the heroes learn to adapt to their new-found disabilities and learn the lesson that everyone is important no matter what challenges they face. Each of these teaching narratives attempts to help stutterers by making the world more understanding toward them. The characteristics of the people who stutter are little different from the other visual media portrayals though; the main detail that changes is how people react to them. The stutterers are still presented as weak, nervous, and unheroic.⁶ Even though these visual narratives have seemingly good intentions they fail to create characters that are complex enough to be real and instead fall back upon the old stereotypes.⁷

Stereotypical depictions are not unusual in film, television, or comic books. These visual media make use of clichés to create easy connections with the viewer or reader. Stuttering is just one of the many ideas, conditions or maladies that has been used as visual shorthand for other internal characteristics. These stereotypical associations differ for each condition but undoubtedly they exist. In recent years other physical or mental challenges such as blindness and deafness have begun to be portrayed more realistically in the visual media. Alternatively, stuttering has rarely been shown in a positive or even-handed manner but rather the speech impediment is often used as a narrative code to help facilitate commonly held stereotypes. People that stutter are frequently portrayed as humorous, nervousness, weak, unheroic, or villainous. These generalizations rarely allow a given character an opportunity to become well rounded and instead he commonly becomes a personification of his stuttering or a trait that is associated with it. This in turn serves to perpetuate a greater misunderstanding about people that stutter. In doing so both stutterers and those they come in contact with are harmed and that is the most unfortunate visualization of all.

NOTES

1. Works about disabilities in film and television include: Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992), Klobas (1988), Norden (1994).
2. For the purposes of this article, the American word "stuttering" is being used as opposed to the British "stammering."
3. Numerous studies have been conducted about the attitudes of various members of the general public toward stutterers. These include: Doody (1993), Dorsey and Guenther (2000), Gabel (1999), Klassen (2001).
4. It should be noted that the use of stuttering characters for comic purposes appears to be virtually nonexistent within the comic book medium. Most likely this is because the auditory element of stuttering, which is lacking in comic books, is often a key component of the impediment's humorous affect on many.
5. An example of this can be found in *Runways* #9–10 (second series).
6. Even though the Justice League claims that all handicapped people can be heroes, they look and act nothing like heroes when they developed physical impediments. Green Lantern even states, "S-Sure am g-glad my m-m-muscles d-don't s-s-stutter" (*Justice League* #36, 12).
7. Occasionally, biopic films or television shows like *The Right Stuff* (1983) or *I, Claudius* (1976) portray fictionalized versions of real life persons that stutter (in these cases John Glenn's wife Annie and the Roman emperor Claudius) and entertainers that stutter in real life ask for a character to stutter realistically, as is the case with stutterer James Earl Jones's character in the film *A Family Thing* (1996). (Surprisingly, it is rare for real life stutterers to act in narratives that include nonstereotypical characters that stutter. Often, as is the case with stutterer Bruce Willis in *Color of Night* and *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, a very clichéd character that stutters is

showcased. These instances of seemingly positive portrayals of people that stutter are greatly outnumbered by the more stereotypical ones discussed earlier.)

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