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# Analysis of *Angelhead*

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Honor's Project: Analysis of *Angelhead*

*Angelhead* is a memoir written by Greg Bottoms, the brother of a paranoid schizophrenic. Through Greg's eyes, we take a look at this devastating mental disorder and how it affected the Bottoms family. At age fourteen, Michael Bottoms had his first psychotic break. After returning home from an Ozzy Osbourne concert, Michael began breaking things in his room, hearing voices, and screaming for help. This is just the beginning of his sad journey through schizophrenia. As an adolescent, Michael was a bully, a pot head, and an outcast. He had very few friends and terrible grades. Mr. and Mrs. Bottoms didn't know how to handle their oldest child, and their lack of understanding certainly didn't improve his condition. But inside what appeared to be just a troubled teen, Michael was full of inner conflict and obsessive thoughts about good and evil. After graduating from high school, this inner turmoil was too much to contain, and Michael began to show the world his insanity. He was obsessed with decoding the Bible, talked to the voices in his head, and ignored all forms of personal hygiene. He wasn't able to find a job or move out of his parent's house. After eventually being diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, Michael's life consisted of years of drug abuse, homelessness, unhelpful medications, sexual abuse, psychiatric homes, and suicide attempts. Finally, after confessing to a crime he didn't commit and attempting to burn down his family's home while they were sleeping inside, Michael was sent to prison, where he remains to this day.

To be diagnosed with schizophrenia, the person in question must show two or more of the characteristic symptoms found in the DSM for a significant portion of a one month period;

Michael just so happens to show almost all of them. He has delusions, such as the belief that the President of the United States is “out to get him”. He has hallucinations, such as seeing Jesus walk down the hallway of his high school. Additionally, he has disorganized speech patterns. His conversation topics often switch rapidly, something referred to as derailment. Another speech abnormality seen in Michael is alogia. Although he spent a lot of his time quoting scripture or threatening his family, he went through phases where he said almost nothing at all for weeks. As for avolition, the inability to start or complete a course of action, Michael does hardly anything but smoke and watch tv. He has no motivation to get a job, have a hobby, or attempt to have a normal life in any way.

Michael also displays social and occupational dysfunction. Since the onset of schizophrenia, he has lost all the friends he ever had and didn't manage to make any new ones. In fact, he has no kind of relationship with anyone except for his family members. As for his occupation, he simply doesn't have one. Michael isn't capable of even getting a job interview, let alone having a career and being able to support himself. His case also fits the criteria for the duration of symptoms; the DSM says that there must be signs of the psychological disturbance for at least six months. We see many symptoms of schizophrenia in Michael as early as his sophomore year of high school and until the end of the book where he is nearly thirty years old.

The next step in diagnosing someone with schizophrenia is making sure they don't have schizoaffective disorder or a mood disorder. We can rule these out by concluding that the person in question didn't have any major depressive, manic, or mixed episodes while exhibiting active-phase symptoms. If they did have an episode while exhibiting active-phase symptoms, the duration would have to have been brief in relation to the active and residual periods. I believe Michael fits these criteria as well. Although he does have some depressive episodes, they are usually short-lived and he doesn't exhibit as many characteristic symptoms of

schizophrenia during those times. For instance, when he attempted to kill himself by drinking Drano, he had just decided to clean up his act by beginning to socialize with others and cleaning himself and his room at the community home. Although he was clearly severely depressed and psychologically unwell at the time, he also showed far fewer signs of schizophrenia.

Next, the person in question's disturbance must not be caused by drug abuse or some other medical condition. Michael was never diagnosed with any other medical conditions, not that that means he didn't have one. Also, there is no denying the fact that Michael severely abused drugs for most of his life. He used LSD, pot, coke, speed, you name it. Also, this drug usage happened primarily during adolescence when vital brain development is taking place. However, according to the memoir, there is no evidence that drugs cause or trigger paranoid schizophrenia. This is the only piece of criteria that may not completely fit Michael's case. It is very possible that his condition was caused by misuse of drugs, but without further information on his exact drug usage and which drugs undoubtedly cause schizophrenia, we would have no way of knowing. Finally, if the person in question displays a pervasive developmental disorder, they can only be diagnosed with schizophrenia if delusions or hallucinations are also present for at least one month. We have no evidence that Michael had any kind of autism or pervasive disorder, so he fits this criterion as well. With the exception of Michael possibly having a substance-related disorder, he fits the diagnosis criteria for schizophrenia perfectly and I believe displays enough symptoms to be diagnosed as a schizophrenic.

One concept from the chapter on Schizophrenia that was very present in *Angelhead* was delusions. Delusions are ideas that people with schizophrenia believe even though they have absolutely no facts or evidence to support them. Michael is constantly wrapped up in his own little world, a world full of delusions that separate him from reality. At different times during the book, Michael believes that God is communicating to him through numbers, that the CIA is

out to get him, and that a police trooper's belt has the ability to speak. But perhaps his biggest delusion is one concerning his father. Michael believes that his dad is the source of evil, that he sends demons into the world, and that absolutely everything that goes wrong in his life is some new hell sent from his father. This delusion goes so far that Michael decides to kill his father by burning their house down; fortunately, he doesn't succeed.

My second concept is inappropriate affect, when a person's emotions don't seem to fit the context in which they are displayed. While riding in the car with his parents, what most would consider to be a normal situation, Michael shows signs of fear and stress and eventually opens the door and jumps out of the moving vehicle for no apparent reason. However, while standing outside his burning house talking to his family and the fire department, Michael smiles and asks his mother what she's making for breakfast, a response that clearly doesn't fit an arsonist that has just been caught red-handed. My final concept is the double-bind hypothesis, which says that parents give contradictory messages to their children, therefore confusing the child because nothing they do is considered right. I can see where this might be the case with Michael. His parents are completely baffled by his behavior and have absolutely no idea what to do. Quite often, his mother takes the softer approach, telling Michael he is doing well and encouraging him to find a job or change his personal hygiene habits. However, Mr. Bottoms takes an opposite approach, convincing Michael he is worthless and even hitting him on occasion during his teenage years. Their parenting styles are completely different and they do send mixed messages, something that would be confusing for any child. Although I doubt this family dysfunction is what actually caused Michael's schizophrenia, it certainly didn't help matters and it is likely that it fueled his madness.

I do feel that reading *Angelhead* helped me better understand schizophrenia. While reading a textbook gives you plenty of information on a disorder, reading a memoir helps you

see the disease from a much different perspective. By looking at Michael Bottoms through his brother's eyes, we see his personal history, his home life, and the details of his existence from someone who possibly knew him better than anyone else. We get a great look at Michael's life from beginning to end, and not in a doctor or psychologist's office, but day-to-day in the real world. However, there are also cons to reading memoirs. Although it's nice to see Michael through Greg's eyes, Greg is not a doctor. He cannot diagnose someone with schizophrenia, and he is far from subjective in the matter. Additionally, everything you read in *Angelhead* is a memory. A very subjective, possibly incorrect memory from an author that could just be trying to tell a story or sell more copies of his latest novel. We don't know what Greg's motives are, or if everything he has written is really how it happened. However, all in all, I think that memoirs are a great way to get a close look at a mental illness and see it from a perspective you maybe hadn't thought of. *Angelhead* has provided me with new insight into schizophrenia, and I believe that I now have a better understanding of this mental disorder.