

Medicine in film: Exploring dementia in *The Father* (2020)

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Worldwide, an estimated 57 million people are affected by dementia, a broad term used to describe neurocognitive decline that impacts daily functioning, and the etiologies are heterogeneous, ranging from Alzheimer's disease to traumatic brain injury.^{1,2} Presentations of dementia are also variable but can include progressive memory loss, hallucinations, or agitation.^{1,3} When medical students learn about neurological disorders through traditional means, such as lectures or medical literature, the descriptions of signs and symptoms, while helpful, may lack a patient perspective. Often, the focus is on the disease process and management with little attention, if any, to the lived experiences of patients. As a result, it may be difficult for learners to appreciate what patients with dementia and their families experience daily, which can negatively impact the patient-provider relationship. What do these symptoms look like? How do they affect day-to-day functioning and familial interactions? Without firsthand experience seeing it, one can only imagine. Considering many medical students view their education as lacking sufficient exposure to dementia and feel unprepared to work with this patient population, learning through film may prove beneficial.⁴⁻⁶ Through this medium, it may be possible to have a nuanced and insightful exploration of dementia and how it might manifest. Spoilers ahead!

The Father (2020), directed by Florian Zeller, follows the life of 80-year-old Anthony (Anthony Hopkins) and his daughter and caretaker, Anne (Olivia Colman), through his experience living with dementia.⁷ Although the specific type of dementia is never revealed, what is important is his experience rather than the diagnosis itself. The non-linear story arc presented from Anthony's perspective invites the audience to enter his world and experience his dementia together. I hope to highlight three aspects of dementia that were portrayed—cognitive fluctuations, changes in mood, and impact on relationships.

We are first introduced to Anthony arguing with Anne over a caretaker whom he suspects has stolen his watch that he purposefully left out in the open. When pressed about where he placed his watch, Anthony hastily replies, "I don't know and I don't remember" (04:38-04:39). His response encapsulates the mental state that we observe for the rest of the film, one filled with confusion and declining memory. However, our objectivity as observers is soon called into question in the next scene as Anthony finds a strange man in his flat who

claims to be Anne's husband. As Anne returns home and Anthony goes to clear up this misunderstanding, we see the shock and fear in his eyes as he realizes Anne is not the same Anne we previously met. Rather, she is a different person altogether (now played by a different actress). We come to understand that our perception of reality, presented through Anthony's experience, is distorted, forcing us to question who Anne truly is. As the film progresses, these distortions in his perspective occur repeatedly through changes in the physical environment or the people themselves. We learn that Anthony is weaving together a narrative from his memories both past and present, but never one that truly represents the real world.

This film also skillfully exhibits Anthony's erratic emotional states. In many instances amidst his forgetfulness, he is presented as a passive and frail individual who accepts the reality he is told. However, when Anne introduces Anthony to a new caretaker, he is surprisingly charming, sharp, and witty, bringing this guest to laughter, yet moments later, he halts the cordiality by describing the guest's laughter as inane. He then goes on to command the situation, capturing the attention of everyone in the room, and clearly articulating that he does not need assistance and will not leave his flat. A completely new side of Anthony is revealed, not the Anthony we have previously seen who is forgetful, slow, and confused. Instead, we get a glimpse of Anthony in his prime, a force to be reckoned with. In contrast, by the end of the film, Anthony finds himself in a nursing home, breaking down and crying for his mother, "I don't know what's happening anymore. Do you know what's happening?" (1:29:46-1:29:51). The sad truth is, no, we don't. As much as we want to help Anthony, we are just as lost and powerless as he is.

Another central theme is the toll that dementia can have on familial relationships. Anthony deeply cares about Anne, and when she informs him that she will be moving to Paris, he believes that she is "abandoning [him]," (09:43-09:44) and wonders "[w]hat's going to become of [him]" (09:52-09:53). Later at the dining table, Anthony walks in on Anne's husband trying to convince her that a nursing home is where her father would have the most appropriate care. Anthony pretends as if he heard nothing to avoid making a scene. However, his dementia soon manifests itself when he departs for more food only to re-enter the dining room overhearing the exact same conversation again. Anthony's loss of temporal aware-

ness forces us to relive this feeling of betrayal as matters are discussed behind his back. In yet another poignant scene, Anne's husband is fed up with Anthony and slaps him across the face multiple times as Anthony cowers in fear. As Anne rushes into the commotion, her husband is not the same man we saw hurting Anthony (the actor has once again changed). By this point, we know Anthony's perspective, like ours, is flawed and are uncertain if we witnessed the real abuse of a vulnerable senior or simply his mental projection of his failing relationships and feelings of abandonment. Ultimately, everyone seems to be in a losing situation; Anne eventually places her father in a nursing home and feels heartbreak for being unable to care for him, while Anthony cannot adjust to the unfamiliar environment he finds himself in.

Overall, *The Father* offers a vivid and authentic look into dementia and its various manifestations by having the audience experience Anthony's dementia and its progression firsthand. Perhaps no other film has been able to achieve this feat, where the pain and brokenness of patients and families is palpable. You may be wondering why this is important. In Canada, there are currently over 600,000 people living with dementia, and this number is expected to increase as the population ages.⁸ A diagnosis of dementia is life-changing

and devastating for many,⁹ and as future healthcare providers, we will undoubtedly encounter patients and families living with dementia. Thus, it is of utmost importance that we are prepared and equipped to provide care that is empathetic, compassionate, and patient-oriented so that patients feel supported in their health journey. While this film showcases only one man's experience with dementia, it is undoubtedly a good resource for those interested in beginning the learning process surrounding dementia.

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