POSTS AND G-G-GLHOSTS:
EXPLORING THE PORTRAYAL OF STUTTERING IN IT (2017)

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By

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Dedication

The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to my parents and the name they gave me

MY PARENTS, for always listening, for loving me and all my imperfections, and for
encouraging me to speak my mind always

MY NAME, for being simultaneously the bane and joy of my existence, and for connecting me
to my Mamaw and to the Grandfather I never knew

Thank you, I love you,
Mary-Cecile
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“One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter.”

- James Earl Jones

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ABSTRACT

Representation is important. This is a sentiment that pervades the current American media landscape. Media that includes historically marginalized and underrepresented groups of people are becoming more and more popular. Or maybe people are realizing that inclusive media have been popular all along.

While there is a growing number of media artifacts that represent various racial, sexual, and gendered identities, this sudden explosion of inclusivity has ignored the myriad experiences of the disabled. Media narratives are still heavily populated by able-bodied and neurotypical characters. Is there not room for complex disabled characters in blockbuster films, books, and video games?

This study looks specifically at the speech disability, stuttering, and how it is portrayed in different types of media. The 2017 film, IT, is posited as the main artifact to be studied. Chapters 1 – 3 analyze the history of stuttering representations, apply different theoretical frameworks to this history, and examine Stephen King’s 1986 novel, IT. Chapter 4 discusses the methods used throughout this study. Using autoethnography, the author seeks to evoke an emotional response from readers and encourage conversation about how representations of stuttering interact with real-life perceptions. Using a close reading of IT and comparative analysis, the author explores specific film, book, and television scenes. Using surveys, the author gauges how people react to IT (2017).
The study concludes with proposed future research, a summation of recommendations for media consumers and creators, and a challenge: that readers rethink fluency and how they conceive of “correct or proper speech.”
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INTRODUCTION

“Sh-sh-she’s all ready, Captain,” Bill Denbrough says to his little brother, Georgie. He smiles and turns the paper boat over in his hands. “You always call b-b-boats she.”

After hearing these lines, I was positive. I realized that my initial assumption was not a trick, an error, or a product of wishful thinking. Bill Denbrough, the main character of the 2017 film, *It*, stutters. One bright Sunday morning in 2017, I went into the movie theater expecting to watch a movie about a clown, and came out excited about this rare example of stuttering representation.

In 1861, stuttering expert James Hunt defined stuttering as “a vicious utterance, manifested by frequent repetitions of initial or other elementary sounds, and always, more or less attended with muscular contortions” (Hunt, 12). As someone who stutters, I look and listen for stuttering representation in film and other media. I say listen because stuttering is the audible repetition of sounds or syllables, but it is also the lack of sound all together. I say look because stuttering is seen in the movement of my jaw, the pursing of my lips, the rolling of my eyes. Stuttering manifests in different ways for different people. It is not easily defined or explained. This ambiguity may explain why stuttering is often misrepresented in media. Filmmakers and writers,
unsure of how to use stuttering, turn it into a stereotype, or worse, choose not to use it at all. In this thesis, I approach the problem of inadequate media representations of stuttering.

I classify this as a problem because media representation is an important part of promoting inclusivity and shaping identity. When I see a stutterer onscreen, my ears perk up. I am anxious to see how they are treated and represented. When a stutterer is treated negatively within the narrative, I am disappointed. So disappointed, in fact, that I wanted to write my thesis about how stuttering is represented on the big screen.

*It (2017)* represents stuttering in a unique way. Stuttering is not used as a marker of weakness, incompetence, or dishonesty. Stuttering is not used as a tool to garner sympathy for Bill Denbrough or infantilize him. Stuttering is not a metaphor for fear that must be overcome. Bill stutters throughout the film, from beginning to end, and does not lose his stutter after an act of heroism. I think *It (2017)* is unique for the aforementioned reasons, because it does not pathologize stuttering as something that needs to be eradicated from the narrative.

Medicine and academia have a history of pathologizing stuttering as a disorder that must be overcome to live a fulfilling life. Without a critical look at the concepts of fluency, dysfluency, and stuttered speech, stuttering scholarship risks irrelevancy. In this thesis, I argue that stuttering needs to be reframed, not as a disorder that impedes life, but as a form of valid communication. Stuttering has intrinsic cultural value as one of the many variations of human speech.

I ask the following questions: What is the history of media representation of stuttering? What are the negative stereotypes often associated with stuttering? How does *It (2017)* defy these stereotypes? How do audiences interpret the representation of stuttering that *It (2017)* provides? These questions are interrogated through close reading, comparative analysis, and surveys. I hypothesize that *It (2017)* will be revealed to be a truly unique example of stuttering
representation in cinema, and that audiences, specifically stutterers, will notice this. Fluent speakers that have no experience with stuttering will most likely not notice this. They will say that Bill’s stutter means nothing to them.

At the end of this thesis, I argue that *It* (2017) represents a positive shift in how stuttering is represented in film. Stuttering has a long history of not being included in visual and audial media, or being included in negative ways. This lack of positive representation contributes to the societal stigma around stuttering and to a stutterer’s own self-consciousness about their speech. This thesis will focus on empowering and positive representations of stuttering rather than rehashing the representations that harm and humiliate.

In Chapter One, I discuss several theoretical frameworks that are important to my argument: Disability Studies, Expectancy Violations Theory, and Folklore. I begin this chapter by defining stuttering and several key terms and phrases, such as “covert stutterer” and “passing as fluent.” This section serves as a brief synopsis of the history of stuttering. Beginning with Sigmund Freud and ending with scholars like Marcel Wingate, I explain how the scholarly perception of stuttering has changed over time. Once seen as a defect that can and must be cured, stuttering is now treated as a disability that cannot be cured, but can be accommodated.

This discussion of the history of stuttering leads to the next part of Chapter One. Here, I talk about the field of Disability Studies with a specific focus on Erving Goffman. Goffman’s book, *Stigma*, is a seminal work in the field of disability studies. It relates to my topic because it addresses how certain marginalized groups, including stutterers, are discriminated against. The entire concept of stigma will be present in my paper, a sort of invisible hand that informs how I interpret texts and analyze survey data.
I then discuss Judee K. Burgoon’s Expectancy Violations Theory. This theory analyzes how people react to social norm violations. While initially created with the study of proxemics in mind, this theory can be applied to all norm violations. Because I classify stuttering as a social norm violation, this theory is an important lens through which to analyze stuttering.

I also talk about Folklore, which I define as a collective body of work shared by a similar group of people. This section talks about the folkloric aspects of Stephen King’s *It (1986)* and the stuttering community. I argue that there are two types of stuttering folklore, folklore that is imposed upon the community by fluent speakers and folklore that comes from within the community itself.

In Chapter Two, I examine specific examples of stuttering in media. Beginning with Moses and working my way to the main character of *It (2017)*, I argue that most of these portrayals are negative. Using the work of Jeffrey K. Johnson and James Berger, I examine the many disarticulate characters that exist in books, television shows, and movies. The second half of this chapter is devoted to stuttering representations that defy negative stereotypes. I want my thesis to highlight the ways a stutterer can be used effectively and positively in media, as something more than a joke or object of pity.

In Chapter Three, I discuss Stephen King’s novel *It (1986)*. After summarizing the plot, I examine the novel through two distinct lenses: folklore and feminism. Both theoretical frameworks are key to my discussion of stuttering and how it is used as a plot device. Per Schelde’s definition of folklore and its purpose is helpful to my discussion, as is Linda Anderson’s feminist critique of *It (1986)*. I refute some of the claims made by Anderson, looking towards what I consider to be a more intersectional approach to critically analyzing *It (1986)*.
In Chapter Four, I explain my methodological approaches. I use evocative and analytic ethnography to talk about my own experiences with stuttering and how these experiences connect to broader theoretical frameworks. I conduct a close reading of *It (2017)*, determining how often the main character, Bill Denbrough, stutters and whether or not his stutter is consistent. I examine how other characters react to his stutter. The point of this method is to prove that *It (2017)* portrays stuttering in a uniquely positive way. I use charts to better conceptualize the data I present. I then compare the stuttering in *It (2017)* to the novel, *It (1986)*, and the television miniseries, *It (1990)*. I compare these artifacts in order to examine how societal sentiments towards stuttering have changed over time.

I also discuss my surveys in Chapter Four. I plan to administer surveys related to *It (2017)*. In this chapter, I explain how I structured my questions and administered by survey. My hypothesis is that stutterers will want to write a lot about the topic of stuttering in relation to *It (2017)* and will immediately pick up on Bill’s stutter. But fluent speakers may be hesitant to even mention Bill’s stutter or not notice it at all. I think fluent speakers will have a hard time articulating their feelings concerning Bill’s stutter. I argue that we lack the appropriate non-clinical vocabulary to have productive conversations about stuttering. Many people do not understand it, classify it as a disability, or even think to look for it in media. This chapter will put these hypotheses to the test.

In Chapter Five, I put my methodologies into motion. I conduct a close reading, compare the various iterations of *It*, and discuss my survey data. Were my hypotheses correct? Is *It (2017)* truly unique in its representation of stuttering? Are media representations of stuttering changing for the better? Will my thesis emerge from the horrors of Stephen King’s *It* and arrive at a logical conclusion?
CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

WHAT IS STUTTERING?

W-W-What is stuttering? What iiiis stuttering? What is st-st-stuttering? What… is… stuttering?

Stuttering can look and sound like any of these examples. It can also look and sound like none of these examples. It can be a repetition of consonants or vowels, a prolongation of sounds. It can be a series of pauses, called blocks, where seemingly no sound is made. It is often accompanied by distinctive facial expressions, muscle movements, and gestures. I know what stuttering is when I do it. I know how stuttering feels in my mouth, my lips, my tongue. I cannot define it the way a speech pathologist can, but I know it when I hear it. My anecdotal insistence that I “know what stuttering is” is not sufficient enough evidence of my expertise, so I turn to the experts in stuttering scholarship.

In *Foundations of Stuttering*, Marcel E. Wingate defines stuttering as a speech disorder and does not go any further, stating that the sheer volume of stuttering definitions is a problem within the field itself. He says that each definition reflects “the bias of some purported ‘theory’” (Wingate, 16). The act of even asking the question, “What is stuttering?” is rhetorical and disingenuous, since the author knows what definition they are about to give to their audience. Ironically enough, this section is titled “What is stuttering?” But I can assure you I am not leading you to my own personal definition of stuttering. I, too, am looking for a so-called right definition, something that will put this debate to bed once and for all. As I read through books about stuttering, I notice that Wingate is correct. The line “What is stuttering?” is positioned in the beginning of many introductory chapters. Wingate criticizes the act of “giving the answer by question,” arguing that introducing stuttering in this way inevitably leads to the author’s explanation of the cause stuttering (Wingate, 17). It is this “preoccupation with the cause,” as
Wingate calls it, that lies at the heart of the problem (Wingate, 18). Stuttering scholarship is obsessed with defining stuttering in neat and tidy terms, in terms that can be explained. Wingate spends the rest of his book critically analyzing the majority of stuttering scholarship, and calls them out for their unscientific ways of labelling and fact making.

In the figure below, Wingate lists 8 statements that finish the phrase “Stuttering is…” The first 7 statements are “inadmissible as definitions” of stuttering (Wingate, *Foundations of Stuttering*, 21). Only the final definition qualifies as a credible definition of stuttering. The irony of this chart is the fact that the inadmissible definitions come from speech pathologists while the credible one comes from *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*. Wingate’s figure highlights a major problem in the field of stuttering and in the way stuttering is defined:

Table 1: Wingate’s 8 Statements answering, “Stuttering is…”

1. ________ a morbidty of social consciousness, a hypersensitivity of social attitude, a pathological social response
2. ________ the result of a conflict between opposed urges to speak and to hold back from speaking
3. ________ the disorganization of normally fluent speech that is a consequence of conditioned emotion
4. ________ a symptom of an emotionally disturbed personality that profoundly affects the physical, mental and emotional life
5. ________ a habit of making elaborate preparations for speech on the assumption that it is a difficult and treacherous process
6. ________ an anticipatory, apprehensive, hypertonic avoidance reaction
7. ________ a psychoneurosis caused by a persistence into later life of early genital oral nursing, with oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic components
8. ________ to speak or say with involuntary paused, spasms, and repetition of sounds and syllables

As we can see, stuttering is not something you can sum in one sentence. Stuttering should not have to be easily definable to be studied, treated, or understood. It is nice to have a definition, though, one that dysfluent people can use to easily explain stuttering to fluent people.
The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders defines stuttering as: “a speech disorder characterized by repetition of sounds, syllables, or words; prolongation of sounds; and interruptions in speech known as blocks.” (“Stuttering”). This definition is similar to statement 8 in Wingate’s chart. It is objective, it is factual, and it does not lean too heavily into any particular theory. It describes the act of stuttering, not the cause. No matter what the definition, it must be understood that stuttering is not inherently negative. It is different, it is dysfluent, but it is just as valid as fluent speech.

Now that we know what stuttering is, not what causes it, we can look at other facts about stuttering. The first fact I want to talk about concerns use of the word “stutterer.” For decades, this is the word used to describe people who stutter. Barry Guitar discusses the use of “stutterer” in his textbook, *Stuttering: An Integrated Approach to Its Nature and Treatment*. He uses the phrase “people who stutter” instead of “stutterer” because the latter term identifies people as only one of their many personality traits. However, he notes that many people who stutter refer to themselves as stutterers.

I find the phrase personally empowering because my stutter is not something I need to hide. There is no shame in calling myself a stutterer. I am not the collective voice of those that stutter, but I do feel that we should not be afraid of the word “stutterer,” that it can be reclaimed by people who stutter. I continue to use the term “stutterer” throughout this paper because there is no shame in being one. I spent most of my adolescence denying that I stuttered. Now that I accept that part of myself, communicating with others is a lot easier. Every stutterer has a myriad of personality traits and identifiers. Stuttering is just one aspect of their identity. While I use the term “stutterer,” it is important to note that if you are a fluent speaker, you should not refer to a person who stutters as a “stutterer” without their explicit consent. A reclaimed identifier is only
subversive in the hands of those that reclaimed it, not those that do not understand its history and implications.

The next set of stuttering facts come from my encounter with an esteemed Hearing and Speech Sciences Professor (who I will heron refer to as the HSS Professor). They told me that about 1% of any population on Earth stutters persistently. Most of these stutters are men, but many women (including myself, obviously) stutter. 2 ½ is the average age that stuttering will emerge in those with a predisposition to stuttering.

“But I started stuttering in second grade,” I insisted.

The HSS Professor shook their head and explained that second grade was when people started noticing I stutter, but I more than likely started stuttering much earlier. A conversation with my mother confirmed this, that I started stuttering earlier than I previously thought. When I was 2 ½, I perked my head up whenever I heard a sound and said, “N-N-Noise?” This is my parents’ first recollection of me stuttering. My first recollection is in second grade, when it was brought to my attention by external forces that I stuttered.

Just because a child trips and tumbles through sentences when they are first learning to speak does not mean they will be a stutterer. Stuttering is emergent, coming on after a child learns to speak fluently. Girls are more likely to outgrow stuttering than boys, but for those that continue to stutter into adulthood, life can be challenging. As I aged, I became afraid of stuttering and did anything I could to avoid it.

The fear of stuttering can actually make stuttering worse. Marty Jezer recognizes this fear in his autobiographical work, Stuttering: a life bound up in words. He catalogues the various forms of stuttering he has encountered in his life, including his own. He notes that “a good part of the stuttering problem is brought on by the physical effort not to stutter” (Jezer, 8). The fear of
stuttering is what some speech pathologists may call a “secondary characteristic” (Jezer, 8). Once you are aware of your stutter, you start to develop tools to compensate for what you perceive to be a defect in your speech. This sentiment is supported by the HSS Professor, who compares stuttering to a fear of heights. The fear is within you, it is real and it exists. It is not a ridiculous fear; you are not willing yourself to stutter, but the fear becomes a cycle that makes stuttering inevitable.

This idea differs from statement 5 in Wingate’s figure because Jezer and the HSS Professor are not implying that stuttering is caused by a fear of stuttering. They are just saying that fear compounds it. From my own experience, I believe this to be true. If I am terrified of a certain word, like my name, I will more than likely stutter when I try to say it. It is when I am not thinking about my speech, not examining each and every word, that I am most fluent. I am fluent most of the time. When I tell people I stutter, they will often say, “Really? I can’t even tell,” as if that is some kind of compliment. My fluency as an adult comes from the fact that I learned to accept and embrace my stuttering, but as an adolescent, I tried to hide it. I was what scholars and stutterers alike refer to as a “covert stutterer.”

A cover stutterer is someone that is capable of passing as fluent most of the time. They are constantly trying not to stutter, implementing tools to control their speech. I would substitute words, rearrange sentences, and use what sounds like incorrect grammar in order to avoid stuttering. For example, if I was afraid to ask for “water” at a restaurant, I would refer to the beverage by its brand name. I would sometimes even change words that I read aloud, something that does not work too well when reading works like Shakespeare, where every word matters. I admit that I sometimes still use these tools to avoid stuttering, but I find it a lot easier to just allow myself to stutter. The HSS Professor teaches their clients to stutter openly and that hiding
their stutter is not fair to them. Cover stutterers are concerned with how their stutter is interpreted by others, which leads to high levels of anxiety.

Jezer admits that he did not always consider covert stutterers to be real stutterers. They sounded fluent to him, so he wondered why they bothered to come to stuttering support groups. In his book, he writes about one covert stutterer, Murray, who breaks down in the middle of a McDonald’s after he stutters on the Mac part of Big Mac. Jezer begins to wonder who has it easier, a severe stutterer like himself “or a person who is so afraid of stuttering that each instance of dysfluency brings about a personal crisis?” (Jezer, 10). This story exemplifies the nuances of stuttering and reminds us that labelling someone as a stutterer or fluent speaker is not always easy.

Nothing about stuttering is easy, including the exhaustive discussion about what causes it. I have already mentioned that the cause of stuttering should not be a primary focus of stuttering research, but it is a conversation we must have. There are as many theories as there are scholars, and doctors and speech pathologists.

Jezer says that “there is enough concrete evidence to hypothesize that stuttering is caused by a neurological defect” (Jezer, 4). The HSS Professor focuses on the inherited and genetic aspects of stuttering. The physicians of 1950’s America believed that stuttering was caused by a child being told that they were a stutterer, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, if you will (Shell, *Stutter*, 10). Sigmund Freud was among the first to suggest that stuttering was caused by trauma. And many of the 20th Century theories stayed within the realm of psychological explanations to stuttering, something Wingate laments:

“The fundamental reference to speech was abandoned in favor of attractions that were to be found in psychology. In very recent times there is evidence of a renewed interest in speech as
the fundamental reference, a revival that can be expected to benefit the study of stuttering” (Wingate, Stuttering, 9).

Before the rise of the psychological theories, stuttering was primarily considered to be a physical defect. Marc Shell discusses the gruesome experiments performed by 19th Century surgeons Alfred Post and Johann Dieffenbach. “Dieffenbach resected the posterior portion of the tongues of hundreds of stutterers,” which led to countless deaths (Shell, Stutter, 11). The switch from physical to psychological seems almost positive in this respect, at least we moved away from cutting up people’s tongues! But hyper-focusing on the psychological leads to the unscientific belief that stutterers are emotionally disturbed or psychologically traumatized in some way.

Shell discusses another experiment, gruesome in a different type of way, often called the Monster Study. This 1939 experiment was conducted by graduate student, Mary Tudor, under the direction of Wendall Johnson. She sought to explore if labeling a child as a “stutterer” would affect their speech in any way. Fluent and dysfluent children were randomly told they were “stutterers” or “normal speakers.” Some fluent children were told that they were stutterers to test one of Tudor’s questions, “Will labelling a person, previously regarded as a normal speaker, a “stutterer” have any effect on his speech fluency?” (Tudor, 2). One fluent child came to believe she was a stutterer and was afraid to speak. In her final thesis, Tudor wrote of the child, “It was very difficult to get her to speak although she spoke very freely the month before” (Tudor, 66). Tudor and Johnson were essentially attempting to turn these fluent children into stutterers and then “deprogram” them with positive labeling, something they were unable to do (Shell, Stutter, 12). Twenty-two orphaned children were manipulated and tormented for the sake of some graduate student trying to figure out what causes stuttering.
So while asking “What causes stuttering?” is not inherently harmful, it has been the driving force behind many unethical and barbaric experiments. The shift from “What causes stuttering?” to “How do stutterers experience communication?” is a helpful one. Now, speech pathologists focus on supporting stutterers, encouraging critical thought about what constitutes fluent speech, and teaching stutterers to stutter how they stutter. This means teaching stutterers to stutter normally, to not try and force themselves to stutter in a way that is unnatural for them.

The HSS Professor outlined three techniques for treating stuttering:

1. Fluency Shaping: developing tools to speak fluently. These tools may include implementing certain breathing patterns and rates of speech. I was taught Slow Stretched Speech, which focuses on stretching out certain syllables that I might stutter on, a technique I still use today. The goal of Fluency Shaping is to speak more fluently. However, it can sound unnatural.

2. Stuttering Modification: stuttering differently. This treatment, more popular in the 1940’s and 50’s, encourages a stutterer to be hyperaware of their stuttering and to stutter more easily. The goal of Stuttering Modification is to stutter with ease, not obtain fluency.

3. Avoidance Reduction Therapy: confronting your fears about stuttering. This treatment hones in on the fear of stuttering and seeks to reduce it. In speech therapy, I had to call restaurants and ask them about their menus and prices. I was instructed to introduce myself as Mary-Cecile rather than MC, and had to read aloud in front of my therapist. I was put into uncomfortable speaking situations in order to alleviate my fears. The goal of Avoidance Reduction Therapy is not explicitly one thing or another, it seeks to stop stutterers from indulging in harmful behaviors (like word replacement) that just make stuttering worse.

Of course, there are more techniques and treatments than those I have listed, but these three stand out to me as examples of how different the approaches to stuttering can be.
Stuttering research has come a long way since James Hunt called the impediment a “vicious utterance” in 1861 (Hunt, 12). What have we learned? That stuttering is ambiguous, incurable, and varied. Trying to pin stuttering down as one thing or another has, at best, muddled the research field and, at worst, resulted in cruel experiments. I think stuttering scholars, psychologists, and speech pathologists are better served by the current trends of the field. The current trends focus on helping stutterers accept their speech and understand that, though the world was designed with the abled in mind, the disabled can successfully and firmly exist within it.

The next sections look at stuttering through three distinct lenses. Representing various frameworks of thought about disability and human communication, these lenses are helpful tools for discussing stuttering. I generally define them, then focus on how they apply to stuttering. These lenses will also be used to critically examine the film, It (2017), later in this thesis.

**DISABILITY STUDIES**

The first framework I want to talk about is the academic field of Disability Studies. As David Johnstone says, the study of disability is nothing new, but the academic field of Disability Studies is fairly recent (Johnstone, 5). It is an interdisciplinary field. Historians, medical professionals, psychologists, and humanities scholars have all discussed disability. Johnstone writes that in the early days of Disability Studies, it was dominated by the language of other disciplines. These disciplines (medicine, psychology, sociology, and anthropology) “conceptualised disability as a deviant experience within a dominant culture” (Johnstone, 5). Defining disability as “deviance” is problematic. This definition automatically marginalizes disabled communities and labels them with an inherently negative stereotype. It robs people of the right to be proud of their identity.
The practice of labelling has followed disablement for centuries. These labels are often assigned by able-bodied individuals to the disabled. These labels can be words, like “stutterer,” or sentiments, like “stutterers are dysfluent because they are nervous.” Johnstone writes that “it is often believed that certain kinds of social behavior are an inevitable consequence of the disabling condition” (Johnstone, 6). This leads to beliefs such as the aforementioned one. A misinformed person may use this belief to shape their opinion of the stutterer and stuttering in general.

In my discussion of labels, it is important to note that labelling is not inherently negative. Labels can help people better understand an aspect of their identity. When it comes to use of the term “stutterer,” I embrace this label as something that identifies an important aspect of my human experience. Labels embraced by those they describe are empowering. Labels assigned by ableist entities are another story. Use of the term “stutterer” by someone intending to exclude or mock is not empowering or positive. The intent and context of the label indicate whether or not it is empowering to a disabled person. The term “stutterer” is empowering in my hands because 1) I stutter and 2) I recognize its history and choose to reclaim it for myself.

Language is a big part of Disability Studies. Which words should you use? Which words should you avoid? Riley provides readers with helpful guidelines when it comes to this topic. His appendices explain how an able-bodied person should represent disabled people in media, talk about disability, and write about disability (Riley, 219). Erving Goffman’s book, *Stigma*, does not take such a careful and nuanced approach to language. It uses words like “normals” to refer to the able-bodied, and relies heavily on the concepts of stigma and stigma theory. Johnstone writes that “critics of Goffman’s view have suggested that his stance supports a normative view of the unchanging nature of society” (Johnstone, 8). But it is also defended by those that insist
we read *Stigma* with its historical context in mind. Scholars like Thomas Abrams and Sharon N. Barnartt believe that Goffman has been misread.

I do not want to venerate Goffman or read his work within the larger framework of Disability Studies traditions (after all, he wrote *Stigma* before the field of study formally existed). I want to read him in the vacuum of himself. I want to look at specific terms he created and explain how they are useful to my discussion. After all, labels, like them or not, are part of this discussion. Labels also have the ability to empower people. There can be pride in a label.

Returning to Goffman, his use of labels may be disputed, but it is still applicable to my research. He is correct that stigmas can negatively affect people. He defines stigma as a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (Goffman, 4). Stigmatized individuals possess some type of attribute that discredits them in the eyes of their fellow human beings. This stigma takes many forms and manifests in different ways. Goffman discusses all types of stigmatized people, from those that use wheelchairs to the formerly incarcerated. Though these stigmatizations should not be conflated, Goffman constructs a broad and helpful framework for looking at stigmatized populations.

Stutterers are one such population. Stutterers can be “discredited” and/or “discreditable.” Goffman defines a discredited person as a person that assumes their difference is known to other people. A discreditable person assumes that their difference is not known to those around them (Goffman, 4). A stutterer can have experience as being both discredited and discreditable. I find these terms helpful because they run parallel to the lore surrounding both the severe stutterer and the covert stutterer. However, these terms are not without their issues. The term “stigma,” while important, can be problematic. Bank and Kitta write:
“One of the most significant problems with the study of stigma is that it tends to not take the lived experience of those affected by stigma into account and gives a voice instead to the medicalized authority and expert over lay knowledge… The medical voice, as the “expert” voice, is perceived as neutral, but it is not. Those in positions of power and privilege are not outside of their own culture” (7).

Goffman is the medicalized expert speaking for stigmatized individuals. Therefore, we cannot and should not put him on a pedestal. His other terms, “discredited” and “discreditable,” are not magic terms that somehow encapsulate a stutterer’s experience. Stutterers are not one or the other. These terms provide a framework for looking at how people stutter in public spaces. The screen and the page are public spaces that can be populated by fictional stutterers. Are these fictional stutterers stigmatized by other characters and/or by the audience? How do people respond to these characters? We need to understand the stereotypes attached to stuttering in order to examine media representations of stuttering. We also need to understand how fictional and real people react to stuttering.

EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY

The second framework I want to talk about is Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT). This theory, proposed by Judee K. Burgoon in the 1970’s, suggests that “positive violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones…” (Burgoon and Hale). This theory was created with proxemics, the study of spatial relations, in mind. What happens when someone leans in too close to talk to another person? What happens when they stand too far away? EVT grapples with these questions, focusing on the “what happens” part. When people violate each other’s expectations, the societal ramifications can be immense. “Violation interpretations and
evaluations determine whether they are positive or negative violations” (Burgoon, 1). While it may seem that violations are best to be avoided, people can utilize violations as tools of non-conformity. I argue that stuttering is one such violation.

Stuttering is a violation of communication expectations. It defies social norms regarding fluency and pace of language. EVT is a unique theory because it “proposes that positive violations can produce desirable results” (Burgoon, 1). While stuttering is not empirically proven to be “positive” or “negative”, its existence can produce a wide range of positive results. Listeners may be challenged to expand what they classify as correct speech. Stutterers may be encouraged to share their thoughts without trying to change their speech patterns. Society may become more aware of the diversity of communication. Of course, negativity can spring from a situation where a stutterer refuses to curb their violation.

Studies show that “people who stutter seem to be afraid of listener's negative evaluations because of stuttering” (Von Tiling, 161). This fear is warranted, as many listeners’ perceptions of stuttering are negative. Von Tiling’s study shows that listeners labelled a stutterer as “anxious, hesitant, not confident… impaired, speech defect” (168). While listeners may not have intended for their descriptors to appear negative, these words can be connoted as such. When violating a listener’s expectations, a stutterer risks negative responses. I say risk because every stuttered word is an act of violation, non-conformity, rebellion, discomfort, or courage.

Years ago, one of my speech therapists told me a story about one of his friends. This friend stutters, and every time he goes out to eat, he purposefully orders menu items he knows he will stutter on. This man actively violates expectations by guaranteeing he will stutter. My therapist said this helped his friend find confidence in his speech, and he also learned how to respond to different reactions, positive or negative.
I use this theory in my close reading of *It (2017)* and my comparison of *It (2017)* to *It (1986)* and *It (1990).* As helpful as this theory is, there are theoretical limitations to EVT, such as its dichotomous nature. EVT sorts reactions to violations as either positive or negative, with no room for more ambiguous reactions. This theory is also hard to test, as seen in the Von Tiling study. It is hard to quantify descriptors. EVT assumes most violations produce negative reactions, but this may not be true. How should we test this, ask every stutterer to chronicle their daily interactions and rate them as either positive or negative? What may be positive to me may be negative to another stutterer, and vice versa. EVT is effective for introducing stuttering as a non-normative way of speaking, but it does not encapsulate the many nuances of this kind of violation. Many reactions to stuttering are neutral in intent, and can be interpreted as either positive or negative by different people.

Stuttering may not always be classified as a violation. When speaking with my speech therapist, I was expected to stutter freely and openly. In this context, fluency is the violation, not stuttering. Sometimes, when I tell people I stutter, they are confused by my relatively fluent speech. Once they learn that I am a stutterer, they expect to hear me stutter, and are surprised when I do not. In different contexts, stuttering may or may not be expected. But overall, I argue that stuttering is a violation within the context of current social norms.

EVT is a helpful tool to use when discussing stuttering, but I almost feel like stuttering needs its own communication theory. Stuttering is not just a speech violation, it is a dialect, a way of speaking. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals have their own language and culture, and I would argue stutterers have something similar. Stutterers have similar ways of viewing communication and navigating speech. I stutter, and recognize the difficulties that come with it, but do not wish
to be “cured.” Some stutterers share my opinion, others do not. No two stutterers have the same experience with communication, but there are trends that tie us all together.

One glaring thing we all have common: we all have to deal with certain stereotypes about stuttering perpetuated by media. Our reactions to stereotypes may differ, but the existence of stereotypes is indisputable. These stereotypes can be perpetuated by media, which I talk about in Chapter Two. Before that, I want to talk about folklore. These culturally specific stories and ideas weave fiction and reality together.

FOLKLORE

I define folklore as a collective body of work shared by a similar group of people. This body of work can include material and nonmaterial culture. In this section, I discuss nonmaterial folkloric myths about stuttering. These myths can be sorted into two categories: narrative myths that hypothesize about the origins of stuttering, and non-narrative myths that inform common misconceptions about stuttering. I focus on stuttering folklore created by fluent speakers that is then imposed on stutterers. The stuttering community has its own rich folklore that I will discuss later in this section. In this discussion, I aim to avoid othering the stuttering community and myself.

In their book, Diagnosing Folklore, Trevor Blank and Andrea Kitta write that the act of “Diagnosing people—informant or otherwise—as “the folk” inherently frames them as an individual or group that needs to be rescued, saved, or given a voice, thereby assigning them the label of “other” or “not normal” (4). This diagnosis begs the question, “Who are we to decide who needs to be given a voice? What marks people as ‘other’ or ‘not normal’?” (4). As a scholar that stutters, I risk othering the stuttering community and myself at the same time. If I establish stutterers as ‘other,’ I simultaneously become the savior and the saved. This conceptualization is
paradoxical and problematic. Instead of positing myself as an outsider passively observing a community, I should define myself as what I really am. I am an insider, a stutterer and a scholar that wants to explore the implications of media representations of stuttering.

These representations directly affect me and my life. Because I am part of the group I study, it is easier for me to avoid the pitfalls Blank and Kitta outline in their book. They write that, “Even when operating in the best interests of participants with advocacy as the goal, folklorists can still cast these participants in the role of victim with the academic as hero” (Blank and Kitta, 5). I have a stake in this casting because I am personally at risk of victimizing myself. It would be in my best interest to not render myself a victim or a hero. It is with these things in mind, and the fact that I am a stutterer seeking to tell stories about stuttering rather than a fluent person seeking to tell stories about dysfluent others, that I move forward with my discussion.

IMPOSED MYTHS ABOUT STUTTERING

Folklore is key to my overall discussion because it ties narratives of and about stuttering to my analysis of *It*. The narrative of *It* is folkloric in nature. Stephen King was inspired by “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” fairytale and wrote *It* (*1986*) with the intent of making the monster, It, a troll, but decided to go with the now infamous clown in the sewer (Strengell, 174). Since folklore is integral to *It*’s narrative, I want to talk about how folklore is integral to the stuttering community. Folklore is the bridge between the artifacts I study and the community I am part of.

I discuss the folklore of and about the stuttering community because we are a marginalized group. The majority of stuttering folklore appears to be imposed upon us by fluent speakers. The National Stuttering Association (NSA) has an entire webpage dedicated to explaining “myths about stuttering.” They preface their list with:
“People have found stuttering confusing for centuries, and as with so many mysteries, they have tried to explain it with folklore. For instance, people in some cultures once believed that a child stuttered because his mother saw a snake during pregnancy or because he ate a grasshopper as a toddler” (“Myths About Stuttering”).

Here, the “people” are the fluent, the “normal” speakers that are confused by dysfluent speech. These confused people impose myths onto stutterers. The NSA outlines 10 myths about stuttering. These non-narrative myths are concerned with the origins of stuttering and overall ideas many people have about stuttering:

1. **People stutter because they are nervous.**
2. **People who stutter are shy and self-conscious.**
3. **Stuttering is a psychological disorder.**
4. **People who stutter are less intelligent or capable.**
5. **Stuttering is caused by emotional trauma.**
6. **Stuttering is caused by bad parenting.**
7. **Stuttering is just a habit that people can break if they want to.**
8. **Children who stutter are imitating a stuttering parent or relative.**
9. **Forcing a left-handed child to become right-handed causes stuttering.**
10. **Identifying or labeling a child as a stutterer results in chronic stuttering” (“Myths About Stuttering”).**

Many of these myths, like Myth 5 and Myth 10, have already been discussed in this thesis. Other myths, like Myth 2 and Myth 4, will be discussed later. I choose to include these myths because the NSA has them on their main website. This shows how widespread this imposed folklore is. These myths are so common, stutterers and fluent speakers alike have heard of them. I know I
used to buy into the myth that “people stutter because they are nervous.” I assumed that I stuttered because I was an anxious person and often told people, “Sorry, I’m just nervous,” whenever I stuttered. These myths can be very damaging since they are 1) false, and 2) generally negative.

Myths are not just isolated statements, they are also stories. Narrative myths about stuttering exist in many cultures across the globe. The author of Minnesota State University’s webpage, “Folk Myths About Stuttering,” compiles regional myths about stuttering. They pull together various personal and academic sources to explain culturally specific myths about stuttering. The author divides these myths into Etiological Myths (what stuttering is caused by) and Remedial Myths (how to “fix” stuttering). They draw their examples from African American, South African, African, Chinese, Mexican, and European cultures (“Folk Myths About Stuttering”). These stories transcend cultural boundaries. Stuttering occurs in every language, so it makes sense that different cultures would search for a way to explain what stuttering is and where it comes from. Any cultural myth about stuttering that comes from fluent speakers needs to be thoroughly examined. Imposed myths, like the ones mentioned above, can be harmful.

INTERNAL STUTTERING COMMUNITY MYTHS

There are also myths within the stuttering community. These myths are not imposed by outside forces, they are formed and circulated within the community. I am only one stutterer, so I cannot speak for every member of this community and every possible myth, but I can speak about the myths I am aware of.

When I say “myths,” I am referring to stories that are part of a community’s shared culture. These myths are not inherently false or hyperbolic. They represent shared experiences, thoughts,
or opinions. The following 10 myths are part of the stuttering community’s shared culture. Using my own experiences, I conclude that these stories are widespread enough to constitute myths. I base this conclusion off my own life experiences as a stutter and the experiences of others. When reading the “Moses’ Tongue” chapter in Shell’s book, *Common Knowledge*, I relate to many of his personal anecdotes. Shell and Jezer, two scholars who stutter, write about many of the myths. Of course, each myth I list is not part of every stutterer’s experience. The following 10 Internal Stuttering Community Myths are examples of myths that might come from within the stuttering community. If I had to put together a list of 10 Internal Stuttering Community Myths, these are the ones I would suggest:

1. Many stutterers find it difficult to say their own name.
2. Many stutterers can recall a time they ordered something they did not want at a restaurant because they could not fluently say what they wanted.
3. Many stutterers dreaded school presentations, reading aloud, and/or speaking up in class.
4. Many stutterers worked to expand their vocabulary as children so they could avoid using problem words.
5. Many stutterers use tools and techniques to increase fluency.
6. Many stutterers do not like talking on the phone.
7. Many stutterers can recall a time someone gave them well-meaning, but unhelpful, advice like “just slow down,” “just breathe,” or “relax.”
8. Most stutterers are aware of specific sounds that are difficult for them to say fluently.
9. Many stutterers have felt negative emotions towards media representations of stuttering.

10. Most stutterers can recall a time they were mocked for their stutter.

These examples are not negative myths imposed by fluent speakers; they are not positive myths, either. They exist as neutral statements of experience. If you were to talk to someone that stutters about their stuttering experiences, they might mention some of these myths. They might not.

The Reddit forum, /r/Stutter has a thread created by Redditor guzmandota called “Folk myth about stuttering you heard of.” This thread contains an interesting comment by Redditor nukefudge. They write:

“There's something mythical about phrases like these:

‘Just breathe’

‘Just relax’

‘Your mouth's talking faster than your brain can speak’

‘I didn't notice it, it's not a big problem’” (nukefudge)

This comment supports my 10 Stuttering Community Myths list. It shows that stutterers can relate to similar experiences. And of course people in the same community can relate to similar experiences, that’s why they’re members of the same community. This entire Reddit forum provides a space for people who stutter to talk about these myths, ask each other for advice, and write about their personal experiences. The /r/Stutter forum is a folkloric artifact. It is where we (the stutterers) can express our feelings about our invisible disability.

These myths, the imposed and the internal, are part of stuttering folklore. There are myths about the stuttering community that are imposed by fluent speakers. There are myths of the stuttering community created and perpetuated by actual stutterers. Any myth, and any story for
that matter, can influence society at large. In her piece about depictions of mental health and illness, Diane Goldstein writes:

“There is good evidence that society (much like folklorists) reads legend, fiction, and those narratives provided by the popular media as parallel texts or as overlapping accounts leading to a larger and symbolically meaningful picture” (160).

In this way, fiction and folk stories are connected. If society reads these texts within the context of society at large, then it is safe to say that these texts impact society. Fiction can reinforce societal norms or subvert them. Fiction is not inherently political; some narratives exist for the sole purpose of entertainment or pleasure, but I suppose that begs the question, is pleasure not political? For the sake of this thesis, I say that yes, from an academic standpoint, pleasure is political. But from the reader’s perspective, pleasure is sometimes just pleasure. Consumers are not changed by every media artifact they consume and they do not critically examine everything they read. This is important to remember when talking about media representations.

When looking at different representations of stuttering, I must remember that not all representations are trying to make a political argument about stuttering. As someone that stutters, I recognize that I have not been permanently scarred by “negative” representations of stuttering. Porky Pig and Professor Quirrell never bothered me as a child. I did not read Harry Potter for the first time and wonder, “Why does the villain stutter? Does J.K Rowling hate stutterers?”

Looking at these media representations through the lens of academia is what first made me aware of their problematic natures. Remove the lens of academia, a lens that most people do not look through, and these representations may look different.

I say all of this to explain why and how I am looking at media representations of stuttering. These representations are important because they have the potential to inform/misinform fluent
speakers about stuttering. Some of these representations may be apolitical in nature, but their interpretations are not. I do not wish to remove the responsibility from creators, but I am of the mindset that the author is pretty much dead. It is the consumers that interpret different media representations. Through my interactions with fluent speakers and stutterers alike, I find that there is no general consensus on what constitutes a “good” representation of stuttering. Stuttering is a nuanced and complex disability, so it makes sense that its representations will be also.

In the following chapter, I discuss various representations of stuttering. Some of these representations are labelled as “positive,” others as “negative.” I use three distinct labels as gauges for whether or not a representation is positive or negative. They are called Leadership, Curability, and Audibility. These gauges represent my attempt to accurately label each stuttering representations, but these gauges are influenced by own lived experiences. The goal of the following chapter is to provide readers with concrete examples of stuttering representations, discuss how these representations portray stuttering, and examine what the current state of stuttering representation is.

CHAPTER TWO: STUTTERING IN MEDIA
FROM MOSES TO BILL DENBROUGH

Stuttering has a long narrative history, beginning with Moses. James Berger writes that “Moses, of course, was ‘slow of speech’ and spoke with ‘uncircumcised lips’” (Berger, 17). The theory that Moses stuttered is shared by Marc Shell, who hypothesizes that God chose Moses as a representative because God is also a stutterer (Shell, 153). Shell argues that while most Muslims and some Jewish rabbis refuse to entertain the idea that Moses was not bodily perfect, the biblical evidence for Moses’ stutter is strong. There are many biblical instances of disability, from Moses’ stutter to Jacob’s lame hip. It seems fitting to me that God would choose disabled
minds and bodies to act as his proxy. As a God that often chooses unlikely and socially scorned people to do his bidding, it makes sense. David, a young shepherd, was God’s chosen king. Rahab, a prostitute, is part of Jesus’ genealogy. The mouthpiece of God being a stutterer would be a great act of divine irony. God seems to enjoy irony, so it makes sense.

I classify Moses as a positive example of stuttering representation. He is a leader, he is not silenced, and he is not cured of his stutter. These three characteristics can be further defined as gauges I use to label a representation as “positive” or “negative.”

1. Leadership: This refers to a character’s position in the narrative’s hierarchy. I look at the level of influence they have, how well-respected they are, and whether they are taken seriously. I interrogate the representation itself, asking, what is a character’s position in the narrative? Are they respected by other characters? Does their stutter factor into their ability to lead or retain respect?

2. Audibility: This refers to a character’s ability to freely express themselves. Thoughts can be expressed in a multitude of ways, from spoken language to sign language. There are many forms of communication that run along the spectrum of verbal and mute. A character’s lack of verbal articulation does not mean they are silenced. When I speak of “silencing” I am referring to Muted Group Theory. Created by Edwin and Shirley Ardener in 1975, Muted Group Theory “focuses on the ways that the communication practices of dominant groups suppress, mute, or devalue the words, ideas, and discourses of subordinate groups” (Foss and Littlejohn, 2009). The term “mutedness” does not necessarily mean a group is silenced; it means that their experiences are not named by the dominant language system. If a stutterer is not listened to or given a way to express themselves, then I consider them muted.
I interrogate the representation itself, asking, is the character heard? Do they speak or engage in other forms of communication? Are they totally silenced by other characters? If they are not heard by other characters, is the reader/viewer given insight into their inner life?

3. Curability: This refers to how pathologized a character’s stutter is. While stuttering is classified as a speech disability, the label of disability does not equate to inferiority or a desire to be cured. Disabled lives are full lives, they are just lives lived differently. The stutterer’s experience is not a tragic ailment that needs to be fixed, but a different way of communicating that should be appreciated for what it is. Stutterers have their own culture, their own history and icons. If a character overcomes their stutter in a moment of triumph, leaving all negative stereotypes of stuttering behind, I consider the character to be a poor representation of stutterers. Refusing to cure a stuttering character defies the idea that stuttering is something that should be cured, not accommodated, at all costs.

I interrogate the representation itself, asking, does the character lose or overcome their stutter by the end of the narrative? Is the character portrayed as strong and confident only after they are cured of their stutter? Is the cure a celebrated part of the narrative? Is the cure the central theme of the narrative? Is the overall message that stutterers can only be fulfilled once they no longer stutter? The following table lists all the characters I talk about in this chapter and uses my three gauges to determine whether they are positive, neutral, or negative representations of people who stutter. I analyze these fifteen fictional characters because they represent different mediums (film, television shows, novels, and comics), were created in different time periods, and encompass all the stereotypes I talk about in this chapter. I suggest the reader look at the table both now and after they finish this chapter to better understand each character and their contextual narrative:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Leadership*</th>
<th>Audibility*</th>
<th>Curability*</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>a strong leader, leads the Israelites, is chosen by God to lead people</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is concerned about his ability to speak, speaks through his brother</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, God does not cure him</td>
<td>Moses is a good representation of a person who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porky Pig</td>
<td>not a strong leader, a subordinate side character, but is widely recognized by Looney Tunes fans</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his speech is a signature part of his character, stuttering very exaggerated</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, it is part of his characterization as a comic figure</td>
<td>Porky Pig is a neutral representation of a person who stutters that can be interpreted as positive or negative, or be reclaimed by stutterers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuttering Bob</td>
<td>not a leader, berated by male figures of authority, called a “whelp” and treated as incompetent</td>
<td>speaks frequently, difficulty results in another character almost choking to death</td>
<td>is magically cured of his stutter when John Wayne befriends him and gets Bob to call him a “son of a bitch”</td>
<td>Stuttering Bob is a negative representation of a person who stutters, Bob is emasculated by his stutter and only becomes a “real man” when he “stops that stuttering”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Pile</td>
<td>a main character, a right-hand man, respected by his associates but mocked by other characters, depicted as sensitive and a puncher for most of the plot, but he is depicted as someone we should root for</td>
<td>speaks frequently, does not really defend himself when mocked or teased by others</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, still stutter when he kills the villain, Otto</td>
<td>Ken Pile is a neutral representation of a person who stutters that can be interpreted as positive or negative, or be reclaimed by stutterers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Bibbit</td>
<td>not a leader, depicted as an insecure man with an unnatural attachment to his mother, weak-minded and morose</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is ashamed of his stutter, berated by nurses and doctors</td>
<td>overcomes his stutter after having sex with a prostitute but expires when the head-nurse mentions his mother, kills himself at the end of the narrative</td>
<td>Billy Bibbit is a negative representation of a person who stutters, Billy is emasculated by his stutter and only gains confidence when he exerts sexual authority, he is depicted as weak and ultimately unable to function in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarta</td>
<td>a not a leader, rebel fighter, is entranced with important tasks and deemed valuable enough to capture and interrogate</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is mocked by his friends and enemies</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, his inability to fluently results in his torture and death</td>
<td>Tarta is a neutral representation of a person who stutters, he is killed because of his stutter, but this might just be a device used to demonstrate the bravery and horror of fascism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Quirrell</td>
<td>a respected teacher at Hogwarts, seen as nervous and weak-willed</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is picked by coworkers and students</td>
<td>loses his stutter when confronted by Harry Potter because his stutter is faked, used his stutter to make people think he was weak and harmless</td>
<td>Professor Quirrell is a negative representation of a person who stutters, he is a fluent speaker who uses stuttering as a tool to make himself appear weak and is ultimately revealed to be a manipulative villain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>not a leader, a right-hand woman, respected by fellow inmates but not by her husband</td>
<td>is selectively mute because of her stutter, does not stutter when she sings, only says 3 words in the show</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome her stutter, not being able to do this results in her muteness and lack of confidence, she is easily taken advantage of</td>
<td>Norma is a negative representation of a person who stutters, she never speaks and other characters think she is mute, the narrative never allows her to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Stampler</td>
<td>the not a leader, depicted as meek and insecure, unable to defend himself</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his “other personality” betrays him for stuttering and being weak</td>
<td>loses his stutter by the end of the narrative because his stutter is faked, his “other personality” uses his stutter to garner sympathy</td>
<td>Aaron Stampler is a negative representation of a person who stutters, he is a deceptive criminal that uses stuttering as a tool to make people think he is weak, innocent, and incapable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Footpath Killer</td>
<td>not a leader, a malicious serial killer that plagues the FBI, kills 13 people, has low self-esteem</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is bullied for his stutter (this bulling is apparently what causes him to snap and become a serial killer), an FBI agent mocks him in order to catch him off guard</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, is arrested by FBI agents</td>
<td>The Footpath Killer is a negative representation of a person who stutters, his stutter causes his low self-esteem and indirectly causes him to kill people, he is depicted as damaged, weak-willed, and traumatized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King George VI</td>
<td>a strong leader, king of England, respected by people</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is criticized for his stutter, is subjected to unhelpful and strange therapeutic practices, is afraid to read to his children and give speeches</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, learns to use tools that help him speak more fluently, successfully gives a speech over the radio</td>
<td>King George VI is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he successfully leads his country, learns to work with and accept his stutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Billington</td>
<td>a well-respected mayor, frequently gives speeches</td>
<td>speaks frequently, gives his speech even though he is nervous about his stutter, is encouraged by friends to talk how he talks</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, accepts his stutter, gives a successful speech while stuttering</td>
<td>Mayor Billington is a positive representation of a person (or, perhaps) who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Walter Palmer</td>
<td>an Army Private that is constantly mocked by his fellow soldiers</td>
<td>speaks frequently, but is hesitant to do so, his stutter results in an accident that wounds soldiers, is encouraged by Army doctor to accept his stutter</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, learns that he is not incompetent</td>
<td>Private Walter Palmer is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he is told that his stutter does not matter to those with his intelligence, and is encouraged by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odin Arrow</td>
<td>a main character, respected by other characters (but not his family), depicted as powerful</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his stutter is rarely mentioned or mocked, it is just part of his character</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter</td>
<td>Odin Arrow is a positive representation of a person who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Denbrough</td>
<td>leader of the losers’ Club, main character, respected by other characters</td>
<td>speaks frequently, stutters while giving orders</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, does not stutter when he gives an impassioned speech (which is questionable)</td>
<td>Bill Denbrough is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he does not lose his stutter after killing 3 and is not mocked by his friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Leadership: This refers to a character’s position in the narrative’s hierarchy. I look at the level of influence they have, how well-respected they are, and whether they are taken seriously.

*Audibility: This refers to a character’s ability to freely express themselves. Thoughts can be expressed in a multitude of ways, from spoken language to sign language.

*Curability: This refers to how pathologized a character’s stutter is. While stuttering is classified as a speech disability, the label of disability does not equate to inferiority or a desire to be cured.

Positing Moses as the paradigm for positive stuttering representation, I might ask, how does this character compare to Moses? Jeffrey K. Johnson does not rely on Moses when deconstructing stuttering stereotypes in “The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue: Portrayals of
Stuttering in Film, Television, and Comic Books,” but he does look to modern filmic portrayals of stuttering. He cites the Warner Brothers character, Porky Pig, as an example of a negative representation, one that perpetuates the idea that stuttering is amusing (Johnson, 246). Even in the newer adaptation of The Looney Tunes, *The Looney Tunes Show (2011)*, Porky is portrayed as a funny, stuttering side character that is often taken advantage of by Daffy Duck. Porky’s only role is to provide comedic relief, a role that Johnson notes is often given to stuttering characters:

“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” (Johnson, 247-248).

This “exit” is another key aspect of the stuttering stereotype. Stuttering is often pushed aside or not shown at all in media. It seems that writers and directors do not know how to work with the speech impediment. They don’t know what to do with it. Is it a running joke? A sign of anxiety? Or is it something else? Stutterers are cast as this “something else,” this other that is identifiable because that cannot speak fluently. Historically, media does not know how to explain the stutter, so it makes the entire story about the stutter. When a character becomes their speech impediment, a number of ugly stereotypes rise to the surface.

Weakness is one such stuttering stereotype. Johnson writes that stuttering is often used to signify “humor, nervousness, weakness, or unheroic/villainous characters” (Johnson, 245). Johnson highlights a specific scene in the John Wayne film, *The Cowboys (1972)*, where Wayne berates a boy for stuttering. Stuttering Bob stops stuttering only when he calls Wayne a “Goddamned mean dirty son of a bitch” (Johnson, 251). Only when he adopts aggressive
language is he able to stop stuttering and speak to Wayne as an equal, as a man. The tradition of stuttering men becoming “real men” only when they speak fluently, and being deemed insufficient otherwise, is long and documented, popping up in films and books. In *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988), stutterer Ken Pile is portrayed as soft and incompetent. Billy Bibbit of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) is a weakling who, unable to overcome his stutter, commits suicide. If men do not overcome their stutter, they are often punished with humiliation or death. Death comes for Tarta, the timid rebel fighter, in *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) after he is brutally tortured because he is unable to count to three without stuttering.

In the case of Tarta, his torture and death may be a commentary on fascism’s hostility towards the disabled. The fascist Captain Vidal mocks Tarta while mutilating his hand with a hammer. The scene is meant to be horrifying, stunning the audience into silence rather than laughter. Porky Pig this is not. Tarta stutters throughout the film and is chastised by his companions. These seemingly innocent jabs at Tarta’s speech lose their comedic edge when we watch his torture. A character like this is meant to evoke empathy rather than humiliation or malignant laughter. The other characters mentioned seem to stutter for no other reason than to emulate a negative stereotype.

Another instance of stuttering as weakness can be found in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (2001). Professor Quirrell feigns a stutter to hide his true identity as host to the evil Lord Voldemort. When Harry discovers that Quirrell is behind all of the sinister activity at Hogwarts, he shocks the audience by speaking in a fluent, deadpan voice. He mocks Harry for thinking the culprit was Professor Snape, “Yes. He does seem the type, doesn't he? Next to me, who would suspect, p-p-poor s-stuttering Professor Quirrell?” (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*). He does not need to explain why no one would suspect poor stuttering Professor Quirrell. The basis
for this bias is already laid out before us, built up over centuries. Who would suspect a stutterer of being confident? Strong? Capable of constructing complex plans? Quirrell adopted this persona because he knew it would make him seem incompetent and weak-minded.

Most fictional stutterers are men, which may be due to the fact that men are four times more likely to stutter than women. There are a few fictional women that stutter, one of them being Norma from the Netflix show, *Orange is the New Black*. She is a mute inmate that communicates with gestures and facial expressions. In Season 3, Episode 7, it is revealed that she has a severe stutter. As a young woman she was manipulated by a self-proclaimed “prophet” that responded positively to her stutter. However, he did not care about what she had to say, he just wanted to control her. He is satisfied with her muteness, and becomes an abusive husband that berates his many wives. By middle-age, Norma is trapped in her abusive marriage until she pushes her husband over a cliff. He mocks her, screaming that she “has nothing to say,” and then she shoves him over, stuttering out, “Son of a bitch.”

Though this is a nice empowering moment for Norma, this is one of the few lines she has. Her other line is the word “my.” The realization that her muteness is a choice is meant to shock the audience. But her silence seems like a cop-out, a cheap way to portray stuttering without actually portraying stuttering. Not every stutterer remains silent. I stutter and I never stop talking. Norma is not a realistic or helpful representation of stuttering. The *Orange is the New Black* showrunners should let her stutter freely. This would be a way to spite her dead husband, making up for all those years he silenced her. Even better, she could speak not to spite anyone, but for herself. Norma is another example of stuttering equaling weak-mindedness. She is naïve enough to be tricked by a cultic prophet and never gains enough confidence to speak for herself.
Stuttering not only connotes weakness, but also trickery. Returning to Professor Quirrell, he is revealed to be a deceitful character that uses stuttering to trick people into sympathizing with him. Edward Norton’s character in *Primal Fear* (1996), Aaron Stampler, feigns a stutter to garner sympathy from his attorney, then reveals himself to be a homicidal liar. In real life, writer Rachel Hoge expresses her frustration at living a “lifetime of suspicion” due to her stutter (“Don’t judge me by my words”). She was once accused of being drunk because of her repetitious speech and was treated with suspicion by a banker because she could not say her name without stuttering. According to Hoge, “there’s a myth that stuttering is a reflection of poor personal integrity” (“Don’t judge me by my words”). I often worry that my stutter will make me come across as flustered or guilty. Reading about Hoge’s experiences confirm my anxiety.

Popular culture’s obsession with being able to “identify a liar” leads to these characterizations of dysfluency as dishonesty.

The final stuttering stereotype I want to address is the misconstrued notion that stuttering is born of trauma. As stated in the “What is stuttering?” section, the idea that stuttering comes from trauma was pioneered by Sigmund Freud. He was quick to shove stuttering into a category of disorders caused by unconscious emotional disturbances. Hypothesizing that stuttering is somehow related to a child’s traumatic relationship with their parents is both uncreative and unhelpful. Hypothesizing that stuttering is indicative of a latent emotional or psychological problem is also unhelpful. This hypothesis lingers in media, manifesting itself in psychologically disturbed killers that stutter and abused children that stutter.

In the crime show, *Criminal Minds*, a serial killer called The Footpath Killer murders people because he is insecure about his stutter (*The Footpath Killer*). His background is never revealed, neither is his name. Most *Criminal Minds* killers come packaged with a sob story about why they
hurt other people, but The Footpath Killer is not traumatized by any person. He is traumatized by his stutter which is a manifestation of his derangement. Even though his appearances are meant to terrify, I find him laughable as a failed attempt by *Criminal Minds* to turn stuttering into a prop. Positing disabilities as fuel for heinous crimes is not subversive or edgy. On the contrary, it reinforces age-old stereotypes that the disabled are somehow grotesque and amoral.

But what if the stutterer is the victim of trauma, not the perpetrator of it? This type of representation is also problematic because it suggests that stuttering is a product of unnatural, deviant behavior inflicted upon the stutterer. It victimizes someone that does not want to be victimized. I would be appalled if someone suggested my stutter was caused by abuse that I just couldn’t remember. Stuttering is not a metaphor for abuse, stuttering just is. The HSS Professor expressed annoyance with the inclusion of the “autocratic father” in *The King’s Speech* (2010). They like the movie but wish they could delete those scenes that suggest George’s father was menacing and abusive. The undertones of abuse once again reinforce the false notion that trauma triggers abuse.

This insistence underscores a more sinister theory, that disability is caused by a dysfunctional family, that a child would turn out perfect and “normal” if they were only in the right environment. This idea explicitly implies that the disabled are unwanted manifestations of humanity’s darkness. They are reminders of how cruel people can be. This is a horrific idea that suggests the disabled would not exist in a utopian home environment. Coming back to stuttering, the idea that only emotionally health children are fluent, as suggested by Freud, is a baseless claim that does nothing for children and adults that stutter.

The examples mentioned above personify many of the questions often directed at stutterers. Are you anxious right now? Why don’t you have more confidence in what you say? Why are you so
nervous? Why are you doing that with your mouth? Are you sure what you’re saying is right? I’ve had all these things said to me regarding my speech. And if people are not saying something, they are often averting eye contact or talking over a stutterer or finishing their sentences for them. Most people are not passive drones that uncritically consume media, but the consistent negative representation, or lack of representation, impacts how people think about stuttering. Without thoughtful media representations of stutterers, how else will fluent people be exposed to the disability?

Expecting the public to crack open an academic textbook about the history of stuttering is a bit ridiculous. Visual media, like film, are vehicles that people can use to affect social change. Because stuttering is an audible disability, it makes sense that film and television would be ideal spaces for introducing stuttering to audiences. These spaces cannot be utilized fully if the stuttering character does not speak or is muted by other characters.

Some of the examples I mentioned in this section can be characterized as “negative” in some way. They do not meet the criteria of my Leadership, Audibility, and Curability gauges. They are not examples of stutterers as respected leaders, stutterers as free communicators, or stutterers allowed to thrive in their disability. Many of the characters I mentioned are punished in some way for not overcoming their stutter, or they are silenced by either the narrative or the narrative’s creator. Many of them are characterized as stupid, naïve, timid, or deceitful.

However, it is important to note that my interpretation of these characters as “negative” is not necessarily the right interpretation. People who stutter interpret these characters in different ways. The HSS Professor told me that some of their friends who stutter proudly wear Porky Pig pins. While Porky can be incredibly offensive to stutterers, he can also be reclaimed by stutterers. The original voice actor for Porky, Joe Dougherty, was a stutterer, but was fired due to
his inability to control his disability. Later Porky voice actors adapted their own versions of the signature stutter for comedic effect without the intention to mock.

While the HSS Professor does not believe that Porky Pig succeeded in this intention, they note that many problematic representations of stuttering were not created with malicious intent, but in order to construct a distinctive media personality.

The same can be said about Michael Palin, who starred in A Fish Called Wanda. The HSS Professor told me that Palin modelled his stutter after his father, who stuttered all his life, and did not intend to offend audiences with his portrayal. Palin supported the foundation, The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering, and was involved in its mission to support children who stammer. The term stammering is used here because that is the common term used in Britain for this speech impediment.

As we can see, labelling representations as “positive” or “negative” is not something done easily. It is not black and white. Media representations are always couched within a context, and this context matters.

DEFYING STEREOTYPES

Within the context of any narrative, it is important to note how the stutterer is treated by other characters. External forces indicate whether or not the character is meant to be pitied, encouraged, or despised by the audience. The quality of a stuttering representation does not just hinge on the single character that stutters, but on the other characters that exist around the stutterer.

The following examples of stuttering representation focus on these external factors. These four characters also provide examples of stuttering manifesting in several forms of media, from children’s shows to multi-media web comics.
MAYOR BILLINGTON

Sometimes, a weekend morning is best spent watching the Disney Channel. One day in early 2017, I happened across an episode of popular children’s show, *Doc McStuffins*. The premise of this show is simple enough: a young girl emulates her mother, who is a doctor, by acting as the local doctor for her various toys and stuffed animals. This is Disney, after all, so a little magic must be involved. All of these toys spring to life whenever Doc is alone with them. In the latest seasons, Doc can even transport herself physically to the land of toys and treat her patients at a multi-level hospital. Over the years, this show has addressed important social and health issues.

In one episode, Doc, who is African American, helps a doll embrace her natural hair. In another, Doc teaches a race car about the importance of fueling your body with healthy food. In the episode I stumbled across, *The Mayor’s Speech*, Doc tackles stuttering. The episode title alone might produce a knowing chuckle from adults for its obvious connection to the film, *The King’s Speech*. It centers around the mayor of toy land, a platypus plushie named Mayor Billington. He is preparing a big speech, but in the middle of practice, his “beak gets jammed” and he starts to stutter (*The Mayor’s Speech*). Billington, voiced by Joe Ochman, is frightened by his sudden inability to speak fluently, and asks Doc to cure him.
Doc is stumped by Billington’s impediment. She diagnoses him with The Stuckies, but does not know how to cure him, so she hits the books. In one scene, she discusses her next steps with her assistant, a hippo named Hallie:

“**Doc**: We've gotta help him. But I'm not sure how.

**Hallie**: Sounds like we outta do a little fact finding to figure this out.

**Doc**: You're right. Even the best doctors need to research. Maybe we can find something on the stuckies in the library” (*The Mayor’s Speech*).

After some research, Doc realizes that there is nothing wrong with Billington. She concludes that is he not sick and does not need to be cured. All he has to do is give his speech and not be embarrassed. At the end of the episode, Billington gives his speech and stutters through it. The toys cheer when he is finished and the credits roll.

There I was, sitting on my carpet eating breakfast on a Saturday morning. I did not expect to see such a poignant and progressive view of stuttering on a children’s show. This episode is what
inspired me to write my thesis on stuttering and media in the first place. I could not believe that the best representation of stuttering I’d ever seen was not some award-winning movie or television show, but a Disney Channel show aimed at children.

What does *The Mayor’s Speech* say about stuttering? First of all, it tackles many misconceptions about stuttering. Doc acts like many fluent speakers do in the beginning. She looks for a way to “cure” Billington and is uncomfortable with the mysterious nature of his disorder. Many fluent speakers are uncomfortable when someone stutters, often resorting to awkward smiles or patronizing comments meant to help the stutterer along. In high school, a classmate once asked me why I was “doing that with my mouth,” a look of horror on their face as if I was morphing into an eldritch monster before their very eyes. *The Mayor’s Speech* perfectly captures the moment of confusion many fluent speakers have. They want to fix stuttering but don’t know how. This episode teaches that with a little education and research, fluent speakers can understand stuttering as another form of communication rather than something that needs to be fixed.

This episode also addresses the misconception that stuttering is inherently bad. While not always the case, many stutterers are the first to suggest that something is wrong with them. Billington immediately wants to be cured and wonders what is wrong with him. With Doc’s help, who acts like his speech pathologist, he accepts his stutter and gives his speech.

The conclusion of this episode is what makes it stand out in my mind. Billington is still seen as a competent leader after he stutters through his speech. His stutter does not keep him from being a good mayor. He does not overcome his stutter at the end, but he does overcome his embarrassment. This crafts a narrative that stuttering is not something to be fixed or overcome,
but something to be accepted. Billington’s speech is a part of his identity and his friends encourage him to embrace his identity as a stutterer.

**PRIVATE WALTER PALMER**

*M*A*S*H, the critically-acclaimed Korean War drama that lasted longer than the actual war, addressed stuttering in its eleventh season. In Season 11, Episode 9, the notoriously elitist Major Charles Winchester encounters Private Walter Palmer (*M*A*S*H, Run for the Money*). From Palmer’s introduction, he is relentlessly teased by his fellow soldiers because of his stutter. Winchester immediately reprimands the soldiers and their leader for mocking Palmer. He decides to take Palmer under his wing, giving him more “sophisticated” books than the comics he sees Palmer reading. He tells the young Private that he should not limit himself because of his stutter, that the way a person speaks has nothing to do with their intelligence.

Throughout the episode, I was simultaneously confused and touched by Winchester’s compassion. He does not usually behave in such a way. He spends most of his time belittling those he deems unsophisticated. So why does he take a liking to Palmer?

At the end of the episode, Winchester listens to a recorded message from his sister, Honoria. He settles back in his chair, closes his eyes, and listens to his sister stutter through her message. If you mute the television, it looks like he is listening to beautiful music. A man known for his propensity to criticize and nit-pick other people, it is shocking that Winchester finds dysfluent speech enjoyable to listen to.

The point of this analysis is not to praise Winchester for being a decent human being and brother, but to note the rarity of such a positive portrayal. While Honoria is not physically present in the show, her stuttered words are there. Winchester does not talk about his mute or shy sister, but instead describes her as eloquent and talkative. This is significantly different than
Orange is the New Black, which chose to portray Norma as selectively mute. The act of letting stutterers stutter is radical in and of itself.

**ODIN ARROW**

Other characters do not have to continuously encourage or praise a stutterer for the representation to be considered positive. Allowing a character to stutter openly without much comment from their fellow characters is just as well. Fluent speakers are not pigeon-holed as “fluent speakers” so why should dysfluent speakers only be identifiable by their dysfluency? It is possible to not comment on a character’s stutter without erasing their disability. Creating multifaceted characters that are not just stutterers is key to creating truly successful representations.

In 2012, Michelle Czajkowski created a web comic called *Ava’s Demon*. It is still ongoing. I discovered this comic while perusing the Internet one afternoon. I was intrigued by its painting-like art style and its use of movement and sound to tell a story. I was further intrigued by the presence of a stuttering character. In my thesis introduction, I mention how I wasn’t sure that Bill Denbrough of *It (2017)* stuttered at first. It took a few lines of dialogue for me to be sure. Same goes for Odin Arrow, one of the main characters of *Ava’s Demon*.

This is a story of relationships, of people and demons, of planets and universes and other worlds. It is also a story of hardship. Odin is a character that comes from a different planet than the other two protagonists, Ava and Maggie. He hosts a demon named Pedri Nanezgani and exhibits traits commonly associated with the deadly sin of Pride. He is shown to be callous, intimidating, analytical, playful, empathetic, and insecure (*Odin Arrow*). He is clearly multifaceted, not definitively labelled as a good or bad person. And he also happens to stutter. His
stutter is written out in purple text and is quite pronounced, especially when he is under stress
(*Odin Arrow*).

His stutter is not used as a joke or a vehicle for pity. It is just how he talks. This does not mean that other characters pretend he does not stutter. On page 0033 of the comic, Odin tells Maggie that she needs to leave the planet with him (Czajkowski, 0033). He stutters throughout his request, “I n-need you to leave the p-p-planet with m-me... it’s n-not safe t-to stay here any longer...” (Czajkowski, 0034). Maggie replies, “That is the most poorly spoken pick-up line I’ve ever heard” (Czajkowski, 0035). This line does not come across as Maggie mocking Odin; she was just forcibly taken from her home planet a few pages ago and told by some strange guy that he needs her to come with him. She is understandably upset. Ava’s demonic host, Wrathia, makes her call Odin a “stuttering coward” on page 0080, but on page 0081, Ava is shown crying and saying, “I’m sorry!! I didn’t mean it!” (Czajkowski, 0080-0081). Odin’s sisters, who classify him as the “stupidest” member of their family, might be guilty of berating his speech impediment (*Odin Arrow*). This is just fan speculation, though. It is not canonically confirmed that his sisters equate his stutter to a sign of “stupidity.” Overall, Odin is not excessively mocked for his stutter. His stutter is portrayed as just another aspect of his character.

Outside the narrative, fans take note of the fact that, “Observing his speech patterns, it appears that he stops stuttering when lying” (*Odin Arrow*). This nugget of information leads to fan theories, of course, as fans scour the text looking for instances of fluent speech. There’s nothing inherently scientific about a stutterer that stops stuttering when they are lying, but *Ava’s Demon* is not marketed as a speech pathology textbook. Personally, I think this aspect of Odin’s stutter is a tasteful and nuanced way to develop his character. Every stutterer stutters differently.
For example, my stutter only becomes pronounced when I am reading aloud, which is not true for every stutterer. According to the HSS Professor I spoke with, many stutterers are more fluent when reading. I do not stutter when I speak in unison with another person, or when I sing, shout, or use profanity. This is my experience. Maybe there is a stutterer out there who does not stutter when they lie, who am I to define the experience of all stutterers?

Odin’s character embodies a new kind of progressive representation that I often see in comics. His disability is not hidden or glossed over, but it is also not the central focus of his character. Other media representations, representations of women, people of color, and members of the LGBT community, seem to be going in this direction. What is this direction I am talking about? I am talking about allowing a character to just exist in a narrative without explanation or justification. I am talking about normalizing diverse representations of people without reducing these representations to what makes them “different.” I am not talking about painting characters with a wide brush and insisting that “we are all the same.” There is a balance between Othering and, what I like to call, Sameifying people.

Not having to explain your identity is a privilege, as is consuming media that does not treat your identity as a lecture point. For decades, white, straight, cisgendered, and able-bodied people have been the protagonists of stories that have nothing to do with their identities. They get to exist as the prototype for a character, all other types of people juxtaposed as Other. They are the blank slate, the one everyone is supposed to relate to, so their existence does not need to be justified. They also do not need to be consistently abused or oppressed in order to solicit sympathy from the audience.

I do not like it when stuttering, or any disability, is used as a tool for sympathy. Why would I want to watch a bunch of movies about stutterers being bullied? I know that happens in real life,
it happened to me. Fluent audiences should not need constant lessons about why it is wrong to mock a stutterer.

But I digress.

Odin Arrow is a good example of a stutterer that is not solely identified by his disability. He is not a metaphor, which is pretty revolutionary. Many media representations of marginalized identities are metaphorized, used as vehicles for particular issues. There is a burden placed upon these representations, a burden that those at the top of the social hierarchy do not feel. One poor representation of stuttering can lead to negative real-world stereotypes about stutterers, while a poorly written fluent character does not lead to negative stereotypes about fluent people. Odin is not a stand-in for all stutterers or for all “different” people in this narrative. He just is.

He stutters openly, talks just as much as the other characters, and is not deified or demonized (even though he does have a demon dwelling inside his body). I want to see more stutterers like this. Stutterers that really are just stutterers, rather than thinly veiled allusions to the bigotry that plagues our society. We have enough tangible evidence of this plague, we need not perpetuate it in our fantasy worlds.

BILL DENBROUGH

There is nothing wrong with writing stories that focus on stuttering, though. Narratives that highlight the abuse stutterers go through are necessary to exposing fluent audiences to this injustice. My point is that all stuttering characters do not need to be abused in order to get this across. Stuttering characters should also exist in more narratives besides stuttering think pieces or biographical exposes. They should exist in science fiction, in fantasy, and in horror.

Bill Denbrough, the protagonist of Stephen King’s It, exists in a world of both realism and horror. His life is part high school drama, part horror story. Bill is relentlessly teased for his
stutter, which is realistic to the world and time period King pulls us into. It would be a blatant disregard of reality not to address the abuses stutterers go through in this context, the same way it is a deliberate and thoughtless choice to avoid mentioning the AIDS epidemic in a story set in 1980’s America. Denying reality is not helpful.

King positions Bill as both a victim of bullying and a hero that leads a group of children to victory over an evil entity. His stutter is part of his identity, but it is not his only identifier. He is a successful leader, writer, and husband. His social skills are not portrayed as limited because of his stutter, on the contrary, people are drawn to him. Bill embodies a well-rounded representation of stuttering. His stutter is portrayed differently across the three versions of It, which is something I explore further in Chapter Four. The book is foundational to the It universe, so let’s begin there. It (1986) can be analyzed through many lenses. I examine how scholars look at It (1986) from a folkloric and feminist perspective.

CHAPTER THREE: STEPHEN KING’S IT (1986)

A QUICK SUMMARY…

It (1986), is a novel written by the Master of Horror, Stephen King. It is the story of the Losers’ Club, a group of seven misfit children, who battle an ancient eldritch monster over a period of decades. These decades, divided into sections taking place in both 1958 and 1985, are interwoven, happening simultaneously yet separately. The titular monster, simply called It, is confronted by the Losers’ Club as children and as adults. We see a young Bill destroying It for the first time and an adult Bill destroying It for the last time with his friends. This destruction occurs within the confines of a ritual known as the Ritual of Chud. This Himalayan ritual used to defeat the taelus (which is basically It) requires a holy man to track down the taelus, bite Its tongue, and participate in a battle of jokes and riddles with It (King, 683). Bill explains that the if
the human laughed first, “then the taelus g-got to k-k-kill h-him and e-e-e-eat him. His soul, I think. B-But i-if the muh-man c-c-could make the t-t-taelus l-l-l-laug-h f-f-first, it had to go away for a huh-huh-hundred y-years” (King, 684). The Losers’ Club later enacts this ritual by entering Its mind and weakening It with their courage, heart, and unity. Bill defeats It in the Ritual of Chud by reciting a phrase he often uses to help control his stutter, “He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts” (King, 681). The themes of childhood, magic rituals, and memory give this novel a distinctively folkloric feeling.

FOLKLORE: IT AS A FAIRYTALE ABOUT OVERCOMING CHILDHOOD

*It (1986)* was born from King’s fascination with “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” fairytale (Strengell, 174). This tale is mentioned explicitly in the novel. Bill says that he cannot remember the way into Its lair. Instead of a door, he sees, “This ih-image of g-g-goats walking over a bridge. From that story, ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff.’ Crazy, huh?” (King, 1135). King uses folklore, and all of its genre conventions, to craft a tale about childhood and transitions. Scholar Per Schelde writes:

> “Folklore demands a willingness to suspend, temporarily, reality and logic… The believer is transported into a separate reality where different rules for behavior are in effect. She will pass through the troll-mirror and be taken on a heady trip down wishful lane and become superwoman for a while” (Schelde, 6).

To take *It (1986)* seriously, we must suspend what we know about fear and childhood and embrace what we don’t know. We must enter the world of It, where childhood traumas are palpable and conquerable. The hope of *It (1986)* is that the horrors of childhood can be overcome.
Overcoming is a key theme in this novel. Beverly must overcome her sexually abusive father, Eddie must overcome his hypochondriac mother who has Munchausen’s by Proxy. King also positions Bill’s stutter as something that is overcome. In the novel’s epilogue, he appears to lose it “for good” (King, 1152). With one line of dialogue, is seems that King dismantles his positive and unconventional narrative surrounding stuttering, but we need to look closer. Bill’s stutter is not “overcome,” it is forgotten. By the end of the novel, the Losers start to forget their childhood. They forget Derry, It, and each other. It could be argued that this is a symbol of them finally moving on from their childhood trauma, and thus a good thing, but I say otherwise.

Memory is an important part of this story. It is the lack of memory that leads the adults of Derry to be complacent in their children’s disappearances. It is the lack of memory that allows It to dwell beneath the town for centuries. In this story, King argues that memory is vital to successfully changing the future. If we decide that memories are positive things in *It* (1986), then we must also conclude that the forgetting of certain memories is negative. The Losers forget their memories of each other, the good and the bad. They forget that It ever existed and may possibly exist again. And Bill forgets his stutter, which was as much a part of him as Georgie was. Something that defined his life is suddenly erased.

I do not think King wants us to read this revelation as a happy ending. There isn’t any right way to read the epilogue. Like a fairytale, it ends with our characters leaving the fantasy world and coming into the “real world.” Bill’s wife, Audra, awakens from an It-induced coma and does not remember anything about their encounter with the monster. She is a literal sleeping beauty, dying amid chaos and awakening to a world of light and happiness. To her, everything that happened in Derry, 1985 was just a nightmare.
To Bill, the child that slowly forgets the wisdom of his youth as he ages, Derry becomes a blurry dream that he only sees just as he’s about to fall asleep. I wonder if his dream-self stutters? Reminding him of who he was before he let life strip away his memory and identity…

In a way, It is the victor at the end of the novel because It forces the Losers to forget. It makes them believe that everything is too traumatic to remember, so they forget it all, even the happy memories of friendship and love. Bill’s stutter reminds him of Georgie and Derry and It, so he chooses to suppress his stutter for good. It erases Bill’s disability the way an ableist director might erase Hawkeye’s deafness in *The Avengers (2012)* or Peeta Mellark’s prosthetic leg in *The Hunger Games (2012)*. It seeks to erase everyone’s differences and turn them into one thing: food. Everyone is the same in Its eyes, It literally does not see color or ability. It sees dinner.

So in a way, the real enemy of this novel is that which seeks to sanitize and sameify people and their traumas. For me, the epilogue is one of the saddest parts of the book because the Losers part ways as indifferent acquaintances, emotionally cleansed robots ready to move on with their lives. But obviously the memories are somewhere inside Bill, rising to the forefront of his mind every night. They are trying to tell him something. Maybe they want him to remember his friends, maybe they want him to let himself stutter again. Because his stutter was, after all, his stutter. He stuttered before It and he could stutter after It, if he wanted to. He could own his stutter once again, and not let something as ridiculous as a clown take it away from him.

**AND FEMINISM: IT AS MOTHER**

Scholar Linda Anderson critically examines *It (1986)* from a feminist perspective. She argues that King represents women in a dichotomous and two-dimensional way, as always “there for male characters, as either mother-enemy or mother-comforter” (Anderson, 118). It, the mother-enemy, wants to devour the Losers. Beverly, the mother-comforter, wants to care for them.
Anderson concludes that “the devouring bITch-mother can only be destroyed by masculine force, knowledge, and language in an exorcism of pre-Oedipal anxiety” (Anderson, 120).

Without delegitimizing this critical analysis of *It (1986)*, I want to push back on Anderson’s conclusion. I think that she defines “male language” too broadly. To her, all the language spoken by men and boys in this novel constitutes “male language,” but there are many types of language in *It (1986)*, not just male and female language. As a stutterer, Bill’s language is noticeably outside the normative confines of male language. He stutters, pauses, and trips through his sentences. This way of speaking should not be shoved beneath the umbrella of male language without being examined. Ideal male language is not stuttered, it is spoken with authority. Bill defies this norm by speaking in a way often associated with frailty and femininity. Bill talks a lot, too. His stuttered speech litters the 1153 pages of *It (1986)*. Unlike many other stutterers in media, Bill is not silenced.

In *It (1986)*, Bill does not lose his stutter until the epilogue of the novel, when he loses his memories of his childhood, his hometown, and his friends. As stated in the previous section, he says his stutter is “gone for good,” but so is part of his identity (King, 1152). The loss of his stutter is not due to bravery or the sudden realization of “real masculinity,” it happens because he forgets part of his life and part of himself. The epilogue aside, for most of the novel, Bill stutters openly and frequently. He successfully leads the Losers’ Club and defeats It as a boy/man with a stutter.

Anderson’s labelling of Bill’s speech as just another form of male language fails to address the subversive nature of Bill’s stutter. Each boy in *It (1986)* is complex, they inhabit other spaces of marginalization outside of their gender (Mike is African American, Stan is Jewish, Ben is fat). The focus on the biological Mother and monstrous feminine detracts from more nuanced
discussions of the characters and their roles. It also detracts from a critical examination of language, gender, and identity. Anderson seems to equate male language to the use of gendered slurs like bitch and whore, and so includes Bill under this umbrella because he uses these words. His speech is outside of a male/female dichotomy, existing instead in a space all its own.

**MOVING FORWARD**

All of the frameworks outlined in Chapter Two and Three can be used to analyze stuttering in any form of media. I use these frameworks, and critical analyses of *It*, to explain how and why I chose to examine *It* (*2017*). In Chapter Four, I explain how I closely examined Bill’s speech patterns in the film *It* (*2017*) to better understand how his speech is coded. I also explain how I structured my surveys. Using JoEllen Shively’s article, "Cowboys and Indians", as a model, I explain how I construct this study. Shively had twenty American Indian men and twenty White American men screen a film in groups of five. Questionnaires were administered after the screening and viewers participated in focus group interviews (Shively, 1992). I alter this framework to better fit my methodological needs, removing the focus group interviews and incorporating short and long answer survey questions. Hearing, or in this case reading, people’s thoughts is an important part of my work. I am not just closely analyzing an artifact and I am not just asking people about an artifact, I am doing both.

The conversation about stuttering is meant to extend beyond my own interrogation of Stephen King’s *It*, isn’t it? Chapter Four introduces both my solitary and people-oriented methodologies. One of the lessons of *It* is the importance of community. After all, Bill did not defeat It by himself.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS

The first half of this thesis provided you with backstory. I defined stuttering, discussed the narratological history of stuttering in media, and explored Stephen King’s *It* (1986). In the following half, I explain the multiple methods I use to analyze the film *It* (2017). These methodological tools are used with the intent to argue that *It* (2017) is a uniquely positive representation of stuttering. Each method has a context and a set of limitations. My goal in using these methods is to better understand how Bill’s stutter is portrayed and how this portrayal is interpreted by audiences. In this chapter, I thoroughly explain each methodology and why I chose it. Four distinct methodologies will be outlined: autoethnography, close reading, comparative analysis, and surveys.

AN OVERVIEW OF METHODS

All four methods I use are applicable to my argument. The autoethnography provides readers with tangible examples of my personal experience as a stutterer. It makes my work more accessible and relatable. The close reading allows me to apply analytical tools to a text. I can interrogate *It* (2017) using the frameworks of Disability Studies, Expectancy Violations Theory, and folklore. The comparative analysis allows me to track how representations of stuttering have changed over time and to compare mediums. And the surveys give me the chance to take my research outside of myself. I can examine the relationship between *It* (2017) and its audience.

TALKING TO MYSELF

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The term autoethnography can be broken up into two words, autobiography and ethnography. Autobiography refers to the telling of your own story, while ethnography refers to the observational description of a human society. Together, these words create a qualitative research
method that involves an author reflecting on their own experiences and tying these experiences
to larger societal themes.

There are two types of autoethnography, the evocative autoethnography and the analytic
autoethnography. Ellingson and Ellis define these two methods as follows: “Analytic
autoethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena,
whereas evocative autoethnographers focus on narrative presentations that open up conversations
and evoke emotional responses” (445). Both types of autoethnographers have criticized each
other, something Leon Anderson mentions in his article on analytic autoethnography. He does
not wish to rehash this debate. Instead, he seeks to propose new guidelines for the analytic
autoethnography that support traditional social science models. These guidelines require the
researcher to be “(1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member
in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social
phenomena” (Anderson, Leon, 373).

Based off these criteria and the criteria for the evocative autoethnography, I conclude that I
am using both these methods. Throughout this thesis, I write in first person, tell personal stories,
and make declarative, opinion-based statements like “stuttering is not inherently negative.” This
writing style, while not traditionally academic, is part of the evocative autoethnography. The
narrative style of self-observation encourages the reader to feel empathy. I want readers to feel
moved, to conceptualize stuttering, and disability in general, outside of a scientific model of
thought. Stuttering has been pathologized by many scholars and medical professionals
throughout history. The evocative ethnography allows for concrete examples of stuttering that
will hopefully allow readers to better understand what I am talking about.
On the other hand, I also want to connect my personal experience to larger societal themes. Analytic autoethnography allows me to abstract concepts and think about them within specific theoretical frameworks. I want to connect personal stories to traditional communication and literary theories. By combining the analytic autoethnography with the evocative autoethnography, I inspire emotion in readers while remaining grounded in academic frameworks. When utilizing either of these methods, I seek to avoid navel-gazing. My personal stories are meant to provide tangible examples of theoretical concepts and to make my work accessible. In this thesis, the author is visible, active, and self-reflective. I find the autoethnography to be an effective method when it comes to discussing an issue that personally affects my life.

I also find the autoethnography to be an appropriate method considering that Stephen King, the author of the original *It*, is inspired by his own experiences. Many of his characters are writers like himself. Many of them also suffer from alcoholism, something he struggled with throughout his life (“Stephen King: Alcoholism, Drug Addiction and Fame”). King often situates his stories in his home state of Maine. His biting commentary of the American small town and American Puritanism is fueled by his lived experience. A source I spoke to told me that at a book tour, they asked King why he wrote Bill as a stutterer. King replied that he had a childhood friend who stuttered and owned a bike similar to the one Bill rides. Clearly, King’s writing is inspired by real-life events and people. It seems fitting for me to emulate his tendency to project his life into his writing.

When using autoethnography, I risk sounding too casual and subjective. On its own, autoethnography is not enough to convince readers of my main argument. Anecdotal evidence does not hold up under traditional academic scrutiny. I am aware of my voice throughout this
thesis and recognize that each personal story is tinged with bias related to my lived experience. It is necessary to recognize this and not pretend that my experience is representative of all stutterers. I hope that my autoethnographical approach provides context, relatability, and empathy to my arguments.

CLOSE READING

I chose to conduct a close reading along with my other methods because it is an effective tool to use when unpacking the complexities and nuances of a narrative. Christa van Raalte closely reads *Elysium (2013)* in her analysis of gender, marginality, and narrative (van Raalte). The identification of specific scenes and lines aids in her discussion of the sexism present in the film. I aim to do the same with my close reading of *It (2017)*.

A close reading involves critically analyzing a text with attention to how it is constructed. In the case of this thesis, the film, *It (2017)*, is a text that can be closely read. I look at how stuttering is portrayed in this narrative and briefly comment on how each character, who are part of a group affectionately called The Losers’ Club, is characterized.

Strengell focuses on characterization in her literary analysis of Stephen King’s work. She discusses how King uses the Gothic, myths and fairytales, and literary naturalism in his works. She writes, “When identifying with the characters, the reader fears for them, feels sympathy, and takes a stand—that is, actively participates in the development of King’s stories” (Strengell, 4). The relatability of King’s characters is what draws readers to his work in the first place. *It (2017)* is aware of King’s close attention to character. The film focuses on each character, rather than the monster, and encourages audiences to do the same.
In my close reading, I focus on the film, not the novel. Knowledge of King’s original work enhances understanding of the film, which is something I comment on, but the film needs to be understood as a separate artifact.

I analyze *It (2017)* within the context of Disability Studies, Expectancy Violations Theory, and folklore. These frameworks are defined and discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. Through this analysis, I provide readers with a qualitative and quantitative look at Bill’s stutter. I chart Bill’s speech, recording how often he stutters and what letters he stutters on. This close reading provides readers with an in-depth analysis of *It (2017)* and its characters.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

I will dive headfirst into *It (2017)*. But I also want to skim the surface of *It (1990)* and *It (1986)*. The film, miniseries, and novel are separate artifacts connected by a common narrative. Each narrative varies in complexity, the novel being the most complex of the three. Comparing the narratological framework of each iteration of *It* would be another thesis entirely. My comparative analysis focuses on how Bill’s stutter is portrayed in each artifact.

Comparing these three works allows me to examine how stuttering portrayals change across mediums and over time. Why is Bill’s stutter more severe in the novel? Why is Bill’s pejorative nickname, Stuttering Bill, not used in the film? I investigate these questions and more in my analysis.

As Michael Berube states, disability is “ubiquitous and polysemous” in fiction (Berube, 3). It is everywhere and it can be interpreted in multiple ways. Stuttering manifests differently in the three versions of *It* I talk about. I look not only at how stuttering is represented, but how it is used in the three narratives. Berube argues that “narrative deployments of disability do not confine themselves to representations. They can also be narrative strategies, devices for
exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action” (Berube, 2). While I focus on narrative representations of stuttering for most of this thesis, I need to acknowledge how stuttering is deployed in fictional narratives. Stuttering is present in media in many forms, not just in the form of a stuttering character. It is a tool that can be woven into a narrative and talked about without being tied to a specific character.

Berube goes on to say that a text can “involve ideas about disability, and ideas about the stigma associated with disability, regardless of whether any specific character can be pegged with a specific diagnosis” (Berube, 19). This sentiment reminds readers that labelling a fictional character does not “solve” a text, as Berube puts it (Berube, 20). Labels and diagnoses are important when it comes to representation. If Bill was never labelled as a “stutterer” by himself or by other characters, I would call that a blatant copout. However, audiences should not get caught up in the idea that a diagnosis is a kind of “aha” moment. Bill’s stutter is not an answer to his behavior, it is just part of his behavior.

All of this to say that it is important to keep these concepts in mind when conducting my comparative analysis. Bill’s stutter does not “make more sense” in one narrative or another, and it is not an interchangeable prop. Bill’s stutter is part of his character because that is the way Stephen King made him. Bill’s stutter is labelled as a stutter across all three versions of It, something I discuss further in Chapter Five.

READING PEOPLE

All the aforementioned methods are related to either myself or the text in some way. The following method is related to other people. My approach to this topic is unique because I combine personal stories and textual analysis with interpersonal interactions. I use surveys to better understand the relationship between the cultural artifact, It (2017), and audiences.
SURVEYS

From February 16 to March 15, 2018, I administered a survey to people that have A) seen *It (2017)* at some point since its release on September 8, 2017, or B) watched *It (2017)* for the first time at a screening I hosted on Georgetown University’s campus. In order to take my survey, participants had to watch *It (2017)* and be eighteen or older. Individuals under eighteen are the only group of people I excluded from my survey. I excluded minors because *It (2017)* is rated R. All other people, stutterer or not, qualified for my study.

I placed advertisements around the Georgetown campus and used my immediate social network to meet participants. Some of these participants already watched *It (2017)* on their own, so I just gave them the survey either in person or over email. Some of these participants never saw *It (2017)*, but wanted to participate, so they came to a scheduled screening and filled out the survey afterwards.

I wanted to administer surveys because I recognize that some people express themselves better in writing. Talking to people is helpful, but people communicate in different ways. I hope that anonymous surveys allowed people to be more honest in their expression, as well.

Each participant answered 10 short-answer questions. The survey questions were:

1) Did you like *It (2017)*? Why or why not?
2) Did you like the main characters? (aka, The Losers' Club)? Why or why not?
3) Do you think Bill's stutter is believable? Why or not?
4) How is Bill’s stuttering portrayed?
5) Why do you think Bill stutters?
6) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club brave? If so, who?
7) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club annoying? If so, who?
8) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club weak? If so, who?

9) Who would you label as the leader of The Losers' Club? Why?

10) Do you think It (2017) has a lesson or a moral to teach audiences? If so, what is this lesson/moral?

Each participant had an unlimited amount of time to complete this survey. On average, it took people about thirty minutes to fill out all the questions. One interesting difference between those that took the survey in my presence and those that did not is that the participants that came to my screening were able to ask me about the questions. Several people asked me to explain Question 5. This question can be interpreted inside or outside of the narrative’s framework. Am I asking why the character stutters? Am I asking why Stephen King wrote the character as a stutterer?

This question’s interpretability might be a limitation in my survey. All the methods I have mentioned so far have some type of limitation. A multi-method approach allows me to compensate for these limitations. Based off the data I gathered, I can say that a high level of question interpretability does not always lead to vague or shallow answers. Letting people interpret a question themselves rather than forcing them to maneuver within a prescribed box can yield rich and interesting data.

This method was used to give participants a chance to express their thoughts and opinions, write about their favorite and least favorite parts of the film, and argue their specific viewpoints. It was effective in producing rich qualitative data.

MOVING FORWARD

These methods produced rich sets of data that I unpack in the next chapter. Chapter Five integrates visuals, such as tables and screenshots, to better explain what I discovered on my journey through this metaphorical labyrinth.
CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

CLOSE READING OF IT (2017)

CASTING AND REPRESENTATION

When I first saw *It* (2017) in theaters, I was surprised that the protagonist, Bill Denbrough, stutters. I have seen many representations of stuttering onscreen, from King George VI in *The King’s Speech* (2010) to Norma from *Orange is the New Black*. Bill stands out as a unique fictional stutterer. Not only is he the vocal leader of the Losers’ Club, he also never loses his stutter. His first line, as well as one of his last, is stuttered. I wanted to quantify Bill’s stutter, organize his speech based on how often he stutters and what words he stutters on. I conducted a close reading of the film and charted Bill’s stutter from the first scene to the last.

I organized my data based on the frequency of Bill’s stutter and which words and letters he stutters on. Throughout the film, Bill stutters a total of 65 times. His first line, “Don’t be a wuss,” is said to his brother Georgie. It might be considered ironic that Bill stutters while telling his brother to not be weak, but I see this as the first instance of Bill’s defiance. As a stutterer, he is the strong one, the brave one, the one that tells his brother to be tough. Boys telling each other to not be “wusses” can problematic in and of itself, but that aside, Bill is given the role of strong older brother, a role that many stuttering characters never get the chance to fill. Bill’s stutter does not stop him from speaking boldly, giving orders, questioning his friends, and confronting the monster It.

However, the physical construction of his stutter is not completely natural or believable. Bill never stutters more than twice in a sentence, which is odd considering that he is portrayed as someone that cannot control his stutter. His stutter tries to be consistent, clustering around a specific number of letters and sounds, but is not always successful. Bill’s stutter also leans into
the stereotype that trauma exacerbates stuttering. He stutters most on the name “Georgie,” the name of his murdered brother. This implies that the trauma of Georgie’s demise causes Bill to lose control of his speech.

Since the actor that portrays Bill, Jaeden Lieberher, does not stutter, it is impossible for his stutter to sound totally natural. A fluent speaker forcing themselves to be dysfluent will never fully capture the experience of stuttering. This does not mean that fluent people cannot portray stutterers in believable ways. I simply want to remind readers that a fluent person pretending to be dysfluent is inherently performative. Casting stutterers to play stutterers is an important part of changing societal perceptions of stuttering. As I stated earlier in Chapter Two, the actor who played Porky Pig was replaced because his stutter was too “uncontrollable”. The marginalization of this actor shows that the creative forces behind Porky Pig did not want to represent stuttering as another form of speech, they just wanted to use it as a comedic tool. They wanted the stutter, but not the stutterer. Separating the stutter from the stutterer turns the stutter into an object to be metaphorized.

Bill Denbrough’s stutter is not separated from his identity. It is not used as a comedic tool or a thinly veiled metaphor. This is what makes Bill a unique fictional stutterer. Even though Lieberher is fluent, he carefully and intentionally worked on his stutter for *It* (2017):

“I watched a million YouTube videos of people stuttering, and took tutorials on how to do it and be authentic. You don’t want to have to think about it, you want it to be automatic, so it’s just part of your character,” he said. “I got so used to it that it started popping up when I was reading for other movies” (Thompson).

I cannot deny that Lieberher worked hard to learn how to stutter in what he deems to be an “authentic” way. He did not want his stutter to be a tool, he wanted it to be a natural part of Bill’s
character. While I applaud this, I cannot help but wonder why filmmakers do not just cast stutterers as stutterers? The obvious answer is that a real stutter, as opposed to a performative one, is uncontrollable and costly. Filmmakers do not have the time or money to wait for a stutterer to say their lines properly. This answer is practical but marginalizing. It implies that filmmakers are not interested in interacting with a stutterer, they just want to coopt a disability for a couple hours and not have to deal with the actual person.

Of course, artistic freedom allows people to create and participate in narratives that differ from their lived experience. There is nothing morally wrong about casting a fluent person as a stutterer. It is good to think about the reasons behind casting choices, though, and to encourage filmmakers to include disabled people in their narratives. Why? Because seeing disabled actors onscreen can inspire disabled people to participate in creative industries like film and television. I stopped participating in high school theatre because I thought my stutter was too annoying for the stage. I thought that someone like me should not subject an audience to my dysfluency. The unattainable wish of “fluency” hovered over me. I knew I would never be fluent, so why try? People expected me to attain fluency at some point, to overcome my stutter once I was on stage. After all, there are many stuttering actors that do not stutter when performing. There is a certain fixation on stutterers who do not stutter when they do X thing. The case of Lazaro Arbos, a successful singer who participated in American Idol, comes to mind. He did not stutter when he sang, but what if he did? What if he did not “overcome” his stutter? Would people still have labeled him as inspiring?

Embracing stutterers that do not overcome their stutter is important. Doing this defies the idea that fluency is something we should all strive for. It also subverts the misconception that dysfluency inherently leads to unhappiness.
If someone told me that dysfluency is okay, that acting on stage is not about speaking perfectly, maybe I would have kept acting. Seeing more stuttering characters and more stuttering actors might have encouraged me. This is why representation matters. Seeing and hearing someone like yourself in mainstream culture reinforces your right to be part of this culture. You are included, not excluded. And your experiences are valid.

With these concepts in mind, I move into the scene by scene analysis of *It* (2017). This analysis is divided into two sections, a qualitative and a quantitative section. In the qualitative section, I look at certain scenes from *It* (2017) and deconstruct the stuttering representation that is happening there. In the quantitative section, I analyze Bill’s speech and make charts that represent the consistency of his stutter. Together, these sections create an overall picture of how stuttering is represented in *It* (2017).

**QUALITATIVE CLOSE READING**

Many scholars use qualitative analysis to conduct close readings. Van Raalte closely reads the science fiction film *Elysium* (2013) through the lens of the Bechdel Test, a test named for cartoonist Alison Bechdel. It is a simple test used to gauge the quality of female representation in film. It has three requirements: 1) there are two women in the film 2) who talk to each other 3) about something other than a man (“Useful Notes/The Bechdel Test”). This seems simple, but it is astounding how many films fail this simple test. Raalte uses this test as a framework for her discussion of how women’s speech is limited in *Elysium* (2013) (Raalte, 23).

The Bechdel Test cannot be retrofitted over my discussion of stuttering in *It* (2017). As of 2016, women constitute 49.5% of the human population (“Population…”) while stutterers only make up about 1% (“Stuttering: Myths, Beliefs…”). Asking for there to be two stutterers in
every film is absurd. But for those films that do have a stuttering character, I can propose my own litmus test.

I propose the Moses Test. This is a test used to gauge the quality of stuttering representation in film, but it only applies to films that already include a stutterer. It has three requirements: 1) the stutterer is not mocked by other characters for their stutter 2) the stutterer is not silenced by their stutter, meaning they audibly speak more than twice, 3) the stutterer does not lose/overcome their stutter by the end of the narrative.

This proposed test can be improved and elaborated on. I want to create a basic framework for this kind of cinematic test. If I applied this test to the characters I mentioned in my Literature Review, what would I find? Let’s find out:

Table 3: The Moses Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Requirement #1*</th>
<th>Requirement #2*</th>
<th>Requirement #3*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porky Pig</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuttering Bob</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Pile</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Bibbit</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarta</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Quirrell</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Stampler</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Footpath Killer</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King George VI</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Billington</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Walter Palmer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Odin Arrow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Denbrough (from IT 2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Requirement #1: the stutterer is not mocked by other characters for their stutter

*Requirement #2: the stutterer is not silenced by their stutter, meaning they audibly speak more than twice

*Requirement #3: the stutterer does not lose/overcome their stutter by the end of the narrative
This table demonstrates the shortcomings of my proposed test. Billy Bibbit meets Requirement #3, but that is only because he dies at the end of the narrative. Professor Quirrell meets two requirements, which is great, but he is a fake stutterer. King George VI does not meet Requirement #1, but I would consider *The King’s Speech* to be a wonderful portrayal of stuttering. Even though King George VI is mocked for his stutter in this film, the audience is not encouraged to take part in any mockery. Any slight or jeer is meant as a demonstration of what King George VI had to go through, not as an invitation for audiences to laugh at him.

I would also consider Odin Arrows to be a positive representation of stuttering and to pass all three Requirements even though characters make negative comments about his stutter. Odin Arrow is “mocked” by Ava, but she is possessed when she does so and immediately apologizes afterwards, so I do not count it as being “mocked.” But this is just my interpretation. These Requirements can be contested and interpreted in different ways. Meeting these Requirements is not indicative of a “good representation of stuttering.” These Requirements just give a good indication of which stuttering representations are generally positive. The three characters that pass the Moses Test, Moses, Mayor Billington, and Odin Arrow, are all strong, positive representations of stutterers.

This table shows me that labelling a representation as “positive” or “negative” is a complex and nuanced process. Meeting arbitrary requirements is not enough to definitively label a representation as one or the other. These types of representation tests exist, like the Bechdel Test, to provide a simple framework. They are not meant to label a narrative as positive or negative, good or bad.
It (2017) meets two out of the three Requirements. I wonder if the sequel will meet all three. For now, I want to look closely at It (2017) and examine specific scenes. I examine five scenes that somehow pertain to stuttering.

SCENE ONE: DON’T BE A WUSS

_STUTTERS_ Don't be a wuss.

It (2017) begins with Bill Denbrough building a paper boat for his brother, Georgie, to play with in the rain. Bill carefully folds the paper and applies wax to the boat so it will float. Even though he is sick in bed, he takes the time to do this for his brother. When Georgie asks, “Sure I won’t get in trouble, Bill?” Bill responds, “Don’t be w-w-wuss.” This is the first time we hear Bill speak. He is introduced as a person who stutters. When I first saw the film, it took listening to a few more of his lines for me to realize he stutters. Bill’s stutter is very subdued, something I talk about more in the Survey Data section of this chapter. Still, it is there.
Bill’s stutter is not meant to be a surprise or a shock. By telling the audience that he stutters from the beginning, the film normalizes Bill’s stutter. It is just a part of his character. Georgie does not comment on his stutter at all. He is used to the way Bill talks.

Even though Bill’s first line might sound aggressive, he is not trying to tease his brother. Bill and Georgie are very close, something we see throughout this opening scene. Georgie rests his head on Bill’s shoulder while Bill finishes making the paper boat. This is such a fraternal and familiar gesture. My younger sister used to do something similar, looking over my shoulder at what I was doing, then resting her chin right on my shoulder blade. I’m sure anyone that has a sibling can see the love between Bill and Georgie.

In the novel, Georgie is one of the few people Bill does not stutter often around. He still stutters, showing that his stutter is not just some metaphor for anxiety, but he is not afraid of
Georgie’s reaction to his speech. After Georgie dies, Bill’s stutter is exacerbated and he loses the one person that unconditionally accepted him and his speech impediment.

This scene establishes Bill as a stutterer and his relationship with Georgie as one of mutual trust and love. This scene makes Georgie’s death even more heart wrenching. It also defines what Bill’s “thing” is for us. Every character in this narrative has something they need to struggle with or overcome. Bill struggles with his stutter and, once this scene is over, the death of his younger brother. Bill’s grief over Georgie is emphasized more than his stutter as something he needs to overcome. Throughout the film, Bill’s stutter takes a back seat to the stigma he faces as the brother of a “missing” child.

**SCENE TWO: AGAINST THE POSTS**

From 16:49 to 17:05, Bill walks his bike home after school. He practices saying the rhyme, “He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts.” This is a segment of a longer rhyme from Curt Siodmak’s novel, *Donovan’s Brain*, originally published in 1942. The full rhyme is: “Amidst the mists and fiercest frosts, With barest wrists, and stoutest boasts, He thrusts his fists against the posts, And still insists he sees the ghosts” (Siodmak). King is a big fan of this novel and so mentions it in *It (1986)*. The 2017 film references it as more of an Easter Egg, or a hidden surprise, for fans of the novel and miniseries. Bill uses the rhyme as a tool to help control his stutter. He tries to get through the phrase without stuttering.
In this scene, he struggles to say the word “posts.” This is one of few scenes where Bill reacts physically to his stutter. He furrows his brows, shakes his head, and squeezes his lips together as he tries to say “posts.” Bill is stuck in a block, a type of stutter where the sound cannot be made. When he cannot say it, he sighs and says, “Shit!” After his outburst of anger, he quietly says “post” without stuttering.
Screenshot 6: He thrusts his fists against the posts (2)

Screenshot 7: He thrusts his fists against the posts (3)

(CONTINUES STUTTERING) Shit!
This scene is more of a hidden reference for book fans than a piece of commentary about stuttering, but it serves to complicate Bill’s stutter. It is one of the only scenes where Bill’s stutter stops him from speaking. His block is forced, ugly, and frustrating. This is how 1986 Bill stutters. He struggles through every sentence and gets frustrated. This scene shows how Bill deals with his stutter. It is a glimpse of how Bill stutters in the novel.
SCENE THREE: SPIT IT OUT, BILL

From 23:30 to 23:47, Bill tries to think of an excuse for going to the Barrens when talking to Eddie’s mother. She is a hypochondriac and would never let Eddie go there, so Bill says the boys are going to his backyard for some reason. Unable to think of a good excuse, Richie jumps in and acts like Bill’s stutter is just preventing him from saying they are going to play with a new croquet set. “Jeez, just spit it out, B-B-B-Bill!” he says. This scene is interesting because Bill is not actually stuttering, he is hesitating to speak because he is lying, but Richie takes advantage of his friend’s stutter so they won’t get in trouble. Bill’s stutter is shown to be a good excuse for any hesitation that might be perceived as dishonesty.

Richie is not really mocking Bill in this scene. I’m sure Bill knows this, and maybe his closeness to Richie makes this faux-mock acceptable. I do not classify this as negative; instead, I think it can be coded as subversive. It takes advantage of the classic trope of stutterers being
casually mocked and uses it in a different way. Though I wish Bill had mocked himself. This would’ve made it truly subversive. It would have shown that Bill has agency over his stutter and is able to use something that most people label as negative to his advantage.

SCENE FOUR: HE DIDN’T STUTTER ONCE

From 1:15:35 to 1:16:27, Bill gives an impassioned speech about why he needs to go into Neibolt House and confront It. He tries to persuade the others to come, too. He says they should do this so “another Georgie” does not get taken by It. Bill does not stutter when giving his speech. Afterwards, he walks into the house without looking back while Richie says incredulously, “Wow. He didn’t stutter once.”

This scene is disappointing. It is an example of the classic stereotypical trope that involves a stutterer overcoming their impediment with bravery. When I saw this film in theaters, someone audibly said, “Um okay, who cares?” after Richie’s observation. I agree with this unknown party. Bill’s lack of stutter is not an indicator of newfound bravery or certainty. He could have given this speech, stuttered, and still been able to persuade his friends. This scene does not fit the tone of the film, especially since Bill continues to stutter after confronting It.
RICHIE: Wow.

BEN: What?

Screenshot 10: Bill doesn't stutter (1)

Screenshot 11: Bill doesn't stutter (2)
SCENE FIVE: GOODBYE

From 2:07:08 to 2:07:40, Bill and Beverly exchange their goodbyes. In Bill’s second to last line, he stutters on the word “Portland.” This line is important because it shows that Bill still stutters even after defeating It and confronting his fears. He has shown himself to be a competent and brave leader who also stutters.
(STUTTERS)
You all packed for Portland?

Screenshot 13: Final dialogue (1)

Yeah, pretty much.

Screenshot 14: Final dialogue (2)
Beverly says the final line in this film. This line represents one of the core themes of *It* (2017), friendship and acceptance. In the novel, all members of The Losers’ Club, especially Richie and Eddie, respect Bill for never mocking them. No one ever feels like a loser around Bill. Beverly speaks for herself and for all the characters when she says that. None of the Losers felt like losers when they were together. They encouraged each other to be brave.

**QUANTITATIVE CLOSE READING**

There is a quantitative component to Bill’s speech. He stutters a certain number of times, sixty-five times as previously stated. He also stutters on certain words and letters. His stutter is not completely randomized. Below, I break up Bill’s speech patterns and put this data into charts and tables.
Table 4: Words Stuttered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Stuttered*</th>
<th>Wants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wuss</td>
<td>Richie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vomit</td>
<td>we’ll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>float</td>
<td>quarry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she’s</td>
<td>just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boats</td>
<td>Your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dick</td>
<td>I’m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrens</td>
<td>stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>missing</td>
<td>can’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suck</td>
<td>pick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thrusts</td>
<td>was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posts</td>
<td>poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posts Losers</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could</td>
<td>saw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show</td>
<td>Georgie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s</td>
<td>thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie forgotten</td>
<td>what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public Georgie</td>
<td>swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>backyard</td>
<td>That’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie Georgie</td>
<td>6 times = Georgie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie fucking</td>
<td>3 times = posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You thrusts</td>
<td>2 times = sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supplies posts</td>
<td>2 times = swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thanks ghosts</td>
<td>2 times = thrusts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reading left to right, up and down, this table lists all the words, including repeated words, that Bill stutters on. The capitalized words indicate proper nouns or words at the beginning of a sentence. I define “words stuttered” by words that are a struggle for Bill to say (whenever he repeats consonants or vowels, whenever he expresses frustration at his own speech, whenever the captions indicate that Bill is STUTTERING).

In Table 5, I list all the letters Bill stutters on. These percentages are rounded up, so may not equal one hundred exactly.
He stutters on only one vowel, “I.” He stutters the most on “S” and “T.” Interestingly, when these letters are rearranged, they spell “ITS.” This might be pure coincidence or a clever Easter Egg crafted by the film creators. Either way, it is typical for a stutterer to have trouble with a particular sound or pronunciation. Bill consistently stutters on the letter “S” throughout the film. His stutter is exacerbated whenever he talks about his brother, and he stutters almost every time he says “Georgie.” This exacerbation is a little problematic since it ties trauma to stuttering, but it is true that a stutterer stutters more when subjected to stress.
Bill’s stutter is believable because he has trouble with certain sounds, stutters more when he is stressed, and does not lose his stutter after an act of bravery. His stutter is unbelievable because he never stutters more than once in a sentence, suddenly stops stuttering when he gives an impassioned speech, and only stutters in one way (meaning that he just repeats the first consonant of a word and does not stutter in any other way, though I assume this is because the actor does not stutter and it is difficult to fake stuttering successfully). Overall, I classify Bill as a positive representation of a person who stutters because his stutter is not haphazard or poorly researched. Bill’s stutter is a genuine and honest attempt at portraying a realistic stutter.

**COMPARISON TO IT (1986) AND IT (1990)**

Bill Denbrough exists in three forms. There is the 2017 Bill, the 1990 Bill, and the 1986 Bill. These versions exist in different mediums, look different, and have different experiences, but they all stutter. The severity of their stutter varies. For example, 1986 Bill stutters more than the other two versions. Any difference in severity or frequency is important because it says something about the time period each version inhabits. When I say “time period,” I mean both the chronemic setting of the fictional narrative and the time period the narrative was produced in. *It (1986)* takes place in 1958/1985 and was written in 1986 while *It (2017)* takes place in 1988 and was released in theaters in 2017. The internal and external time periods can tell us something about why characters are represented the way they are.

A pertinent example of this would be the representation of Richie Tozier. In *It (1986)*, Richie is said to have “about a dozen different Voices” (King, 303). He wants to be a ventriloquist, so he practices different impersonations. One of his Voices is a racist impression of an African American man called his “Nigger Jim Voice” (King, 303). While Richie does Voices in *It*
(2017), this particular voice does not make an appearance. He sticks to his British impersonation called The British Guy in the film and “Toodles the English Butler” in the novel (King, 305).

Since this section of the novel takes place in 1958, it can be argued that it is believable for a white child to perpetuate such a bigoted and racist impression without receiving any backlash from his friends during a period of extreme and violent racism in America. *It* (2017) takes place in 1988, a time period, still rife with racism, in which such an impression might not be accepted. *It* (2017) was also released in 2017, a time period in which casual use of the n-word in media is considered extremely offensive, and rightly so. I am not saying that the years 1988 and 2017 are free of racism, but considerable social progress since 1958 makes Richie’s impression socially unacceptable. Here, socially unacceptable refers to the opinion of the majority that is projected onto society. King’s inclusion of this Voice might have been to show readers how pervasive and accepted extreme racism was in 1950’s America, or it might have served no purpose at all. Either way, this Voice was not in either film adaptation of *It* because of the time periods they are set in and the time periods the films were produced in.

There are many examples of time-conscious changes made to the adaptations of *It*. I hypothesize that the changes made to Bill’s stutter are related to how societal perceptions of stuttering have changed over time. I will now compare specific lines and scenes from *It* (1986) and *It* (1990) to *It* (2017).

**IT (1986)**

In Chapter Three, I talk about Stephen King’s novel, *It* (1986), and summarize the plot. Since the novel is 1153 pages, there are dozens of scenes and subplots omitted from the 2017 film adaptation. Bill’s stutter is present in both versions, but it is much more severe and frequent in the novel. As previously mentioned, Bill does not stutter more than once per sentence in the film.
In the novel, Bill stutters more than once per sentence, and often on every word in said sentence. Bill’s stutter is consistently severe in the novel (at least, in the 1958 portions of the book). Most of his sentences sound like this: “H-He said there m-m-might be a buh-bird like that in Suh-houth America or A-A-A-Africa, but nuh-nuh-not a-around h-h-here” (King, 725). Reading this sentence, you can probably imagine what “m-m-might” sounds like, maybe not so much with “Suh-houth.”

King relies on repeating the beginning sound or letter of a word to communicate Bill’s stutter to readers. It can be difficult and unnatural to read at times. Hearing someone stutter seems to be a lot easier than reading someone stutter. Stuttering is an audible disability, one that is difficult to translate into writing. The 2017 film does not attempt to phonetically write out Bill’s stutter in the captions, instead choosing to use the word (STUTTERING) to indicate that Bill’s spoken speech is stuttered.

I admire King’s dedication to consistently writing out every stuttered word in the novel. But there is a difference between hearing and reading stuttering. I think it is more effective to hear stuttering than read it because written stuttering is not as complex or nuanced as verbal stuttering. If Bill’s stutter was directly translated from the novel to the 2017 film, and no changes made, Bill would stutter significantly more in the film. Limiting Bill’s stutter to only once per sentence is not believable. No stutterer is guaranteed to only stutter once per sentence. If that was the case, I would never have gone to speech therapy as a teenager.

Even though there are limitations to written stuttering, I like how King portrays Bill’s stutter in the novel. He frequently mentions the physical aspect of Bill’s stutter, how he moves his face and body. In one scene, Georgie reflects on Bill’s difficulties speaking in school:
“In school, however, it could become so bad that talking became impossible for him.

Communication would cease and Bill’s schoolmates would look somewhere else while Bill
clutched the sides of his desk, his face growing almost as red as his hair, his eyes squeezed
into slits as he tried to winch some word out of his stubborn throat. Sometimes—most
times—the word would come. Other times it simply refused” (King, 11).

King gives a full physical description of Bill in this passage, highlighting his reddened face and
squeezed eyes. Bill even squeezes his desk trying to make the words come. This description adds
a physical level of believability to Bill’s stutter. King recognizes that it is not just a disability of
the mouth, but something that affects all parts of your body.

King weaves Bill’s stutter and his feelings about his stuttering into every aspect of the novel. As
an adult, Bill is self-conscious of his stuttering and is always “Speaking carefully” and slowly so
he doesn’t stutter (King, 127). He also talks openly about his stutter, telling his wife, Audra,
about his experience as a stutterer:

“You said I was the only man in L.A. you ever knew who dared to speak slowly. The truth is,
I didn’t dare talk fast. It wasn’t reflection. It wasn’t deliberation. It wasn’t wisdom. All
reformed stutterers speak very slowly. It’s one of the tricks you learn, like thinking of your
middle name just before you introduce yourself, because stutterers have more trouble with
nouns than with any other words, and the one word in all the world that gives them the most
trouble is their own first name” (King, 141).

He goes on to explain that his stuttering got worse after Georgie died, and that he went to a
speech therapist named Mrs. Thomas who taught him “tricks” (King, 141). Bill concludes his
conversation with Audra by telling her that it was “forgetting Derry” that helped him overcome
his stutter, and that “stuttering’s funny, Audra. Spooky” because it is something you an unaware
of doing but you also hear your stutter in your mind (King, 142). This whole conversation is fascinating to me. The “tricks” Bill mentions are comparable to the tools I mention in Chapter One. While thinking of my middle name would not help me overcome a block (I do not have a middle name), that is an example of something a stutterer might try to do. Bill’s obsession with not stuttering is tied to his obsession with forgetting his childhood. He thinks his stutter makes him weak or susceptible, the same way remembering his childhood experiences with It makes him vulnerable. I think Bill would be better off if he stopped fighting his stutter and his childhood, and accepted them as facts of life.

In the 2017 film, Bill does not talk about his stutter. He never experiences any physical reactions to his stuttering, either. He stutters in a very restrained and sanitized way. His stuttering is not ugly or difficult to watch. In fact, it is barely noticeable.

He does not violate many social norms or expectations in the 2017 film. His stutter is subdued and does not cause discomfort to others. The way people respond to Bill’s violation of the social norm of fluency is different in the novel and 2017 film. In Chapter One, I discuss Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), a theory proposed by Judee K. Burgoon that examines how people respond to violations of social norms. Applied to this discussion of It (1986) and It (2017), EVT can help examine how other characters respond to Bill’s stutter.

In the novel and the 2017 film, characters respond positively, negatively, and neutrally to Bill’s stutter. There are more instances of negative reactions in the novel. In EVT, these reactions can be equated to a violation valence. A violation valence is an association you have with a certain violating action.
In the 2017 film, Bill’s brother, Georgie, has a neutral valence to Bill’s stutter. He does not see it as good or bad. Henry Bowers, a bully, has a more negative valance towards Bill’s stutter, responding to Bill’s violation by mocking him.

There are few negative reactions to Bill’s stutter in the 2017 film. This may be due to the mildness of his stutter or to the filmmakers’ desire to not subject Bill to incessant onscreen bullying. Audience expectations change over time. Do we still expect to see stutterers bullied onscreen? Do we, the audience outside the film, consider stuttering to be a major societal violation worthy of punishment?

These questions are vital to understand how EVT affects both the film’s mise-en-scène and the social environment outside the film. Portrayals of stuttering have shifted in recent years, as
discussed in Chapter Two, from generally negative to positive. The way character react to Bill may be the result of this shift.

Another significant difference between the novel and the 2017 film is the use of Bill’s pejorative nickname, Stuttering Bill. It does not exist in the film but is mentioned frequently in the novel. The reason for this nickname is explained on the first page:

“His (Georgie’s) brother, William, known to most of the kids at Derry Elementary School (and even to the teachers, who would never have used the nickname to his face) as Stuttering Bill, was at home, hacking out the last of a nasty case of influenza” (King, 3).

Putting “Stuttering” before a character’s name is a common practice when representing stuttering in media. Stuttering Bob, the character from The Cowboys (1972), is one example. In the novel, Bill is called Stuttering Bill by many different types of people, from bullies to teachers.

This nickname is absent from the 2017 film, perhaps for the same reasons listed above. Bill’s social violations are not punished as frequently or severely in the film.

Most members of the Losers’ Club have an aspect of their identity that violates the expectations of others. This is true in both the novel and the 2017 film. Bill stutters when fluency is the expected norm. Mike is African American in a town that is predominantly white and racist. Ben is fat, as is Eddie’s mom, when being thin is the expected norm. Stanley is Jewish in a school environment that is anti-Semitic. Eddie is a victim of Munchausen’s by Proxy and lives with the stigma of having a hypochondriac, morbidly obese mother. Beverly does not conform to Derry’s expectations of what a girl is supposed to act like, so the townspeople have negative valence towards her and her actions. Richie’s character is portrayed very differently in the novel and the 2017 film. In both versions, he wears thick, magnifying glasses that make him a target for bullying. In the novel, he also has bucked teeth, which leads to other kids calling him “Bucky
Beaver.” In the 2017 film, he is implied to be a victim of child neglect and malnutrition since he only weighs about 90 pounds. Either way, Richie violates the norms and expectations of others with his appearance and his tendency to talk loud and often.

The characters mentioned violate the expectations of small-town America. They defy the racist, sexist, ableist, and overall bigoted environment that they live in. Characterizing small-town America as such is key to King’s critique. His book, while being a coming of age story about overcoming the traumas of childhood, is also a critique of the romanticization of small-town America. Every form of bigotry and abuse is present in *It* (1986). There is racism, sexism, homophobia, classicism, ableism, child abuse, sexual abuse, animal abuse… the list goes on. Other marginalized characters are subjected to abuse and violence throughout the novel.

Adrian Mellon, a gay man, is assaulted and pushed over a bridge because he is wearing a paper top-hat with a flower and the words I ♡ DERRY on it (King, 20). After falling into the
water, he is dragged away and eaten by It. One of the murderers, Webby Garton, tells officer that “his ‘civic pride’ had been wounded by seeing a fucking faggot wearing a hat which said I ♥ DERRY” (King, 22) and that’s why he attacked him. The murderer’s homophobia is shared by the cops that interrogate them even though all three killers are jailed. Most authority figures in Derry, like cops, teachers, and parents, are complacent in or perpetrators of bigoted violence. This is evident in the novel and the 2017 film, though it is more extreme in the novel.

All of the main characters, the “good” characters, are bullied and abused in this narrative. Bill’s stutter is unique to him, meaning that he is the only character that stutters in the story, but it is not the only instance of difference represented. All of the main characters have a discernible difference that violates societal norms and expectations.

It is this act of violation that brings the Losers together. Some of these violations are more severe or intense than others. Mike’s supposed violation is the color of skin and directly related to his identity as a human being while Eddie’s violation is a violation by association. But this discussion of the Losers’ Club is not an oppression contest, so let’s move on.

Returning to Bill, the biggest difference between the novel and the 2017 film is that Bill loses his stutter at the end of the novel. Since the film only covers the childhood portion of the book, this difference does not mean much. We have yet to see if adult Bill will lose his stutter in the 2019 sequel to *It (2017)*. If he does, I will need to amend my argument that the newest adaptation of *It* is a positive representation of stuttering. It is specifically the fact that Bill does not overcome or lose his stutter that makes this representation so fascinating.

**IT (1990)**

Bill loses his stutter in the television miniseries, *It (1990)*, but only because it includes both the childhood and adulthood portions of the novel. This television miniseries was the first
adaptation of Stephen King’s novel. It changes the chronemic setting of the novel to 1960 and 1990 in order to correspond with the release of the series.

In this adaptation, the childhood and adulthood sections of the novel exist simultaneously, like in the novel. The childhood plot is relatively the same as the 2017 film. Bill still stutters, the other members of the Losers’ Club (or The Lucky Seven as they are sometimes called in this version) exist, and the monster It is defeated in the sewers of Derry. A few major changes between the childhood plot in the television series and the 2017 film are: Henry Bowers is not killed by Mike like he is in the 2017 film. He is instead blamed for the child murders and committed to an insane asylum. This lines up more with what happens in the novel, since Bowers breaks out of the asylum as an adult and attacks the Losers’ Club once again. Bowers’ friends, Victor Criss and Belch Huggins, are murdered by It in *It (1990)*, something that Bowers witnesses. In *It (2017)*, these characters do not die. Instead, Patrick Hockstetter is killed by It in the sewers, but no one is around to witness his grisly death. Patrick is not even in the 1990’s miniseries. Another major difference between the 2017 film and the 1990 miniseries is the way the Losers’ Club defeats It. In the miniseries, they use their imaginations to fight It, turning everyday objects into lethal weapons with the power of their mind. In the 2017 film, they beat It into retreat with regular weapons that do not transform.

Neither the 2017 film or the 1990 miniseries includes the Ritual of Chud, the Himalayan ritual used to defeat an It-like monster called the *taelus*. The entire chapter, The Smoke-Hole, is absent from the 2017 film and the 1990 miniseries. This chapter details a Native American smoke-hole ceremony that the kids perform to learn more about It. The smoke proves to be too much and only Richie and Mike are left to see the vision of Its arrival on Earth millions of years ago. It crashes into prehistoric Derry as a flaming, unidentifiable object:
“The thing in the sky was gigantic, a flaming match-head that was nearly too bright to look at. Arcs of electricity bolted from it, blue bull whips that flashed out from it and left thunder in their wake” (King, 767).

This scene is one of the only pieces of information we get about Its origins and history. Since It is not characterized as an evil, eldritch entity from space in the 2017 film or the 1990 miniseries, it makes sense that this scene was not included. It as an alien being is a key part of the novel, but not so much in the two filmic adaptations.

The removal of Its origin from the two films could be an attempt to simplify the complex narrative. Representationally, a scene where characters appropriate a Native American ritual might not be what modern, 2017 audiences want to see. I argue more for the former reason, that removing this scene, as well as other scenes related to Its spatial origins, makes the narrative simpler and easier to adapt to the screen. Its origins are a major subplot that could be explored in the next adaption of It in 2019.

The 1990 miniseries cut several subplots in favor of digestibility. It does not cut Bill’s stutter, though, or the bullying that Bill is subjected to. In the 1990 miniseries, Bill stutters about as frequently as in the 2017 film. He seems to stutter the same way as 2017 Bill, by picking one word per sentence to stutter on. This is a limitation that fluent actors have, being unable to stutter naturally.

The way characters react to Bill’s stutter is significantly different in this version. Characters mention Bill’s stutter and ask questions about it, the way they do in the novel. Henry Bowers mocks Bill in a way similar to the 2017 film, calling him names like “stuttering freak.” There are more instances of characters having negative valence towards Bill’s stutter.
These differences can be attributed to the reason I mention before. In recent years, stuttering representation has slightly improved and stereotypical depictions of stutterers being bullied are not as prevalent. In the 2017 film, Bill does not need to be tortured by other characters to show how he is discriminated against. Not depicting a stutterer in constant emotional or physical pain is a political statement. It says that people who stutter can lead happy lives, lives that are not constantly plagued by bullying.

SURVEY DATA

As part of my research, I wrote a ten-question anonymous survey. Thirteen people took my survey. Eleven of these people were fluent speakers, two were people who stutter. I recognize this imbalance as a severe limitation in my research. I did not survey enough stutterers, though I did have many informal and undocumented conversations with people in the community. This limitation occurred because I had a difficult time recruiting participants to come to screenings. I also had a difficult time securing surveys from prospective participants. Time constraints, lack of transportation, and limited advertising all affected how extensive my survey was. For any future surveys I conduct, I will create better advertising plans and reach out to participants over a period of at least six months rather than three months.

That being said, I feel that the little data I did gather was helpful and could lay the foundation for future (better) survey research. The two people who stutter that I did survey, while not at all representative of the stuttering community, provided me with valuable insights. They both enjoyed the film and thought it was a surprisingly positive representation of stuttering. I wonder if a larger sample of people who stutter would say the same?

My survey limitations aside, I will now analyze the participant answers. All the participants answered the following ten questions:
1) Did you like *It (2017)*? Why or why not?

2) Did you like the main characters? (aka, The Losers' Club)? Why or why not?

3) Do you think Bill's stutter is believable? Why or not?

4) How is Bill’s stuttering portrayed?

5) Why do you think Bill stutters?

6) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club brave? If so, who?

7) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club annoying? If so, who?

8) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club weak? If so, who?

9) Who would you label as the leader of The Losers' Club? Why?

10) Do you think *It (2017)* has a lesson or a moral to teach audiences? If so, what is this lesson/moral?

Participants answered these questions in short-answer format. Some only wrote a couple sentences, others wrote entire paragraphs. This structure allows me to gather qualitative data concerning my participants’ opinions. My low number of participants is supplemented by the quality of data I gathered. My data is highly interpretable and rich. I will now discuss each question using the data I gathered from thirteen participants. Not all participants are represented by the selected quotes, but all are represented by any numerical data I may use. I refer to different participants by letters: Participant A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, and M.

1) Did you like *It (2017)*? Why or why not?

Out of thirteen people, eleven liked the film, one did not like it, and one had mixed reactions. Participant D thought it was not scary enough, writing that *It (2017)* “relied too much on shock horror and gore, those tactics have been so overused in the past two decades it has become boring.” Participant D also said that the film was too unrealistic for them. Participant H did not
like the film said it was too scary. This person was also upset by the amount of bullying present in the film.

All other participants liked the film. Participants A, B, and F cited its similarity to classic 80’s films as one of the reasons they enjoyed it. Participant E thought it was a great horror movie and not “a low budget gore/thrasher horror film or a film made to make the viewer jump (like most horror flicks out there).” Participant K said they liked it better than the 1990 miniseries. Participant F said it was better than *Annabelle: Creation (2017)*, a film they saw around the same time as *It (2017)*. Participants F and A cited their interest in the Netflix show, *Stranger Things*, as a reason for liking *It (2017)*. Overall, participants liked the film and even those that “disliked” it still enjoyed it.

2) Did you like the main characters? (aka, The Losers' Club)? Why or why not?

All thirteen participants liked The Losers’ Club. Participant E said, “I wish I was a part of The Losers’ Club, so yes I liked them.” Participants E and L praised the child actors for their ability to portray believable characters. A common reason for liking The Losers’ Club was their relatability. Participants used words like “endearing,” “funny,” “vulnerable,” “good natured,” and “loyal” to describe the characters. Participant K really liked how each character has something to struggle with, but Participant A disliked how each character had a “thing” they needed to overcome. An interesting comment Participant K made about Bill was, “Bill struggled with overcoming what society has deemed a ‘flaw’ that would impede his success.” This flaw being his stutter. No participant described Bill’s “thing” as his stutter. They either cited society’s reaction to his stutter or his grief about Georgie as the “thing” he needed to overcome.

3) Do you think Bill's stutter is believable? Why or not?
Ten participants said Bill’s stutter was believable, Participants K and M said it was
unbelievable, and Participant A said it was believable but only to someone that does not stutter.
Participant A cited “the lack of other stutters (blocking) and the inconsistency of what groups
(hard vowels, soft consonants) he struggled with” as a reason his stutter was not believable to
people who stutter. Participant A stutters. Another person who stutters (Participant D) said that
Bill’s stutter was “surprisingly” believable. Participant K, who said Bill’s was not very
believable, talked about Bill’s stutter in the novel. Participant K said that in the novel, “Bill
struggled to articulate the majority of words, whereas in the movie it almost seemed as though
the actor was merely stumbling over his lines.”

Participant E, who is not a person who stutters but used to have a slight stutter as a child, said
they remember feeling “frustrated trying to vocalize what I wanted to say and I see the
frustration in Bill’s face.” Participants E and K said Bill’s suddenly fluent speech (the scene
where he gives the speech in front of Neibolt House) was unbelievable. Participants C, E, J, L,
and M cited their lack of experience with stuttering as a reason they might think Bill’s stutter is
believable. Most fluent participants had little experience with people who stutter.

4) How is Bill’s stuttering portrayed?

Participants answered this question by discussing how Bill’s stutter makes him look, how his
stutter is literally represented in the film, and how other characters respond to his stutter.
Participants that talked about how Bill’s stutter makes him look said things like: “it makes him
look unconfident and weak in the beginning of the movie. However, it is this stuttering that
makes him look the bravest person in the movie (Participant F),” and “He would be more so the
leader if he could communicate fully (Participant A).”
Participants that talked about how his stutter is literally represented in the film said things like:

“Bill’s stutter is a portrayed as a character attribute, not a component of the story arc. I appreciate this. It was nice to see that his closure didn’t come through ‘overcoming’ his stutter (Participant A).”

“Bill’s stutter diminishes in times of high confident emotion (like call to arms outside the well house) and is more pronounced in times of fear/conflict (Participant L).”

“Bill’s stuttering is portrayed symbolically in the film (Participant E).”

“It’s somewhat in the background. It’s mentioned a few times, but nothing in the story really hinges on the fact he has a stutter (Participant B).”

“Bill’s stutter is portrayed much less strongly throughout the movie than it was in the book and subsequently seemed like a minor if unnecessary point to the plot. I found myself frequently noting its absence from his role… (Participant K).”

These comments are interesting because participants varied in how noticeable they thought Bill’s stutter was. Participant K, who was familiar with the novel, thought 2017 Bill’s stutter was barely there. They were frustrated with how his stutter was portrayed in the film. Many participants said Bill’s stutter was not central to the storyline. They appreciated the decentralization of Bill’s stutter. Participants that talked about the way other characters respond to Bill’s stutter said things like: it “almost never comes up. one friend mocked him for it in the beginning and his first ‘heroic’ speech was clear. That is not a problem but I didn’t like how another character pointed it out. It felt like the movie was tying it to his fear (Participant D).”

Overall, participants seemed to like how Bill’s stutter was portrayed more so when they thought it was an obvious, but not central, aspect of the plot or his character. They felt the
believability of his stutter was lessened when he gave his “heroic speech” in front of Neibolt House. Participants do not want his stutter to be the focus of the story, but they do not want it to be “barely noticeable” or inconsistent in any way.

5) Why do you think Bill stutters?

Table 6: Why Does Bill Stutter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Out-of-Universe</th>
<th>Character Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“He has no defining ‘negative’ trait without it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“…used to identify him as a sympathetic character with something to overcome.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-Universe</th>
<th>Medical/Scientific Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think he stutters because his vocal chords are too tight.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“…a neurological quirk.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Intent</th>
<th>Fear/Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’d like to think it was Stephen King trying to positively portray a demographic that is underrepresented in media.”</td>
<td>“Part of me thinks it was tied to fear due to the fact that they made a big deal out his fluent speech. But he did stutter at the end, so it can’t be that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think Bill stutters because he is uncertain.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’m not sure what stuttering is connected to in speech research.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t know, I guess some people just have a stutter.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart explores some of the responses to the question: Why do you think Bill stutters?

Many participants were confused by this question. Those that came to my screenings, Participants, A, B, D, H, I, and L, could ask me for clarification. Those that completed the survey on their own were not able to ask me questions. Participants were confused if they should answer this question in context of the film’s fictional universe or outside of it. This confusion actually led to more thoughtful and richer answers because people provided an “in-universe” answer and
an “out-of-universe” answer. Table 6 shows the range of reasons participants cited for why Bill stutters.

The following questions, questions six, seven, eight, and nine, are answered by the table below. This table represents the number of times a character was referred to as one of the qualifiers.

Table 7: Qualifying Traits of IT (2017) Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Brave</th>
<th>Annoying</th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6) Would you call anyone in The Losers' Club brave? If so, who?

Phrases like “everyone was brave” or “all of them” were said 11 times, so that is why Richie, Ben, Mike, and Stan all have a base number of 11 for the “brave” qualifier. I added more instances to Bill, Beverly, and Eddie because their names were individually mentioned on top of the eleven times everyone was generally mentioned. Bill was individually labeled as “brave” with specific examples four times. Beverly was individually labeled as “brave” with specific examples five times. Eddie was individually labeled as “brave” with specific examples twice.

Bill was specifically called brave because he can “maintain bravery (Participant K),” and “encourages everyone to go (Participant B)” when at the Neibolt House. Bill is also called “arguably the bravest” by Participant K. Beverly was specifically called brave because she confronts her father and “her impulsiveness brought the characters to the challenges they needed
to confront (Participant A).” Eddie was specifically called brave because he confronts his mother and fights It with a broken arm, which impressed Participant F.

7) Would you call anyone in The Losers’ Club annoying? If so, who?

There is no base number for the “annoying” qualifier because only specific characters were called annoying by participants (though Participant L did facetiously write “Yes—all of them” before crossing it out and writing, “No”). Stan was called annoying because he is generally hesitant. Eddie was called annoying because of his hesitance, germaphobia, and tendency to complain about grey-water. Richie was called annoying because he is “rather abrasive (Participant A),” loud, and “never stops talking (Participant I).” Participant K said 2017 Richie was more annoying than 1986 Richie because 2017 Richie was “overly crass or sexually oriented.” Most of his jokes are sexual in nature in the 2017 film, which Participant K believes “felt wrong, forced and generally detracted from his overall character.” Richie, Stan, and Eddie were all called annoying by Participant L because they are “the most petulant/risk-averse members.” Even though these characters were called annoying, several participants said that they were not annoying enough to “stop them being brave (Participant L).” The label of “annoying” did not translate to “dislike.” Also, Participants D and F did not call anyone annoying.

8) Would you call anyone in The Losers’ Club weak? If so, who?

There is no base number for the “weak” qualifier because only specific characters were called annoying by participants. Participant L differentiated being weak and showing weakness. Participant L gives detailed examples of when each character shows weakness but does not label anyone as a weak character “because they develop over the movie. Early on, I’d say they are introduced as weak in their own ways.”
The other participants interpreted this question to mean “who is a weak character?”

Participants A, D, and E did not call anyone weak. Stan was called weak because he did not want to go into the Neibolt House and because he always “wants to give up (Participant F).”

Participant K said that knowing Stan kills himself in the novel clouds their view of 2017 Stan. Because he commits suicide as an adult, Participant K sees all versions of Stan as weak. Eddie was called annoying because he “complains about getting sick (Participant B).”

9) Who would you label as the leader of The Losers’ Club? Why?

Participant E said no one was the leader of The Losers’ Club, that different characters “take the lead at different points in the film.” Bill is called the leader eleven times and Beverly is called the leader once. Participants call Bill “the driving force behind the group’s decision to hunt down It (Participant K)” and cite his ability to “always stay calm (Participant F)” as a reason for labelling him the leader. Participants call Bill the leader because the other characters listen to him, typically do what he suggests, and refer to him as their figure of authority.

Participant A labelled Beverly as the leader and said that she was “the first to admit her reality was changing in unreasonable ways (father—blood everywhere). That takes guts.” They said that she makes decisions when other characters are at a “standstill.”

10) Do you think It (2017) has a lesson or a moral to teach audiences? If so, what is this lesson/moral?

Every participant said that It (2017) has a lesson or moral. The most common lessons/morals listed were: face your fears, adults are unreliable and don’t know what’s going on, together you can overcome obstacles, friendship is important, “complacency is dangerous (Participant G),” and people with nothing to lose will make the most significant changes in a negative situation.
Participant E also noted that the lesson of *It (2017)* is “Clowns are scary—clowns are scary.” I completely agree.

Participant K made an interesting observation about the evil that consumes Derry. They said that adults like “Eddie’s mom and Beverly’s dad” are shown as being evil because “they have been saturated by the wickedness that lives there. The Losers are able to band together to defeat It because they are outsiders of the town and innocent so they are not affected by the hate and fear that resides there.” This is especially true in the 2017 film since The Losers are depicted as some of the only good-natured people in Derry.

The evil in Derry is exaggerated to emphasize the goodness of The Losers’ Club. The hyperbolic depictions of violence, hatred, and abuse fit into the narrative’s genre of horror. These depictions are also a hallmark of Stephen King, a classic signifier of his particular brand of horror. It is also worth noting that besides the existence of a shapeshifting clown, every other act of horror or violence is completely within the realm of possibility. Schoolyard bullies physically attack other students, parents abuse their children, and racism still pervades society. There is nothing unbelievable about Henry Bowers, the Bowers Gang, or the apathetic adults of Derry. All these people exist in real life.

Because of *It (2017)*’s relatability, every participant was able to articulate a list of lessons or morals the film teaches audiences. These lessons may be cliché or simplistic, but they are clear to audiences.

The data gathered from my survey has proven to be rich and insightful. From this data, I conclude that my participants, fluent and dysfluent, all appreciate Bill’s stutter most when it is obvious but not central to his identity. Most found Bill’s stutter to be believable, but those that did not had some excellent points. Participants enjoyed the fact that Bill does not lose or
overcome his stutter, but did not like the scene where his stutter magically disappears during his “heroic speech.” My hypothesis that fluent speakers would not really care about Bill’s stutter or notice it was proven wrong. The fluent speakers who took my survey were very aware of Bill’s speech and were even critical of how unbelievable his stutter was at times. My original hypothesis was not fully interrogated because I did not survey enough people who stutter. In future research, I can better test my hypothesis by having a larger survey sample.

My other hypothesis, that fluent speakers would have a difficult time articulating their thoughts about stuttering, proved to be accurate. Fluent speakers did not know how to answer Question 5 and often cited their lack of experience with stuttering as a reason they could not fully answer questions. Fluent speakers also lacked specific knowledge about stuttering. None of them used any specific stuttering terms or talked about stuttering in a concrete, rather than abstract, way.

My survey data shows me that fluent speakers are interested in being exposed to more people who stutter. As a narrative tool, Bill’s stutter was successful because it made him sympathetic but did not make him appear weak, unintelligent, or incompetent. I would love to expand my survey and my number of participants to get a better idea of how people interpret different media representations of stuttering.

**CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION**

The previous chapter demonstrates that 1) the narrative of *It* is rich, not just in its plot, but in its discussion of stuttering, 2) stutterers and fluent speakers alike recognize Bill’s stutter as an important part of his character, and 3) many fluent speakers do not have the vocabulary to speak comprehensively about stuttering. The rest of my thesis, starting with the question, “What is stuttering?” aims to provide fluent speakers with this vocabulary. It also aims to encourage
conversation, evoke emotion, and provide a space for people who stutter to talk about their experiences.

Chapter One provides readers with an in-depth look at the different theories I use, Disability Studies, Expectancy Violations Theory, and Folklore. Chapter Two historicizes stuttering within a literary context, analyzing fifteen distinct characters that stutter. Chapter Three provides readers with a summation of Stephen King’s novel, *It (1986)*, and examines it through two different lenses. Chapter Four outlines the methodologies I used to investigate the topic of stuttering in media, those being evocative and analytic autoethnography, close reading, comparative analysis, and surveys. Chapter Five includes my qualitative and quantitative analysis of *It (2017)*. The common theme in these chapters is storytelling, a narrative that literally begins with the biblical Moses and ends with an examination of Bill Denbrough. By the end of this thesis, I hope readers can interrogate their own views about fluency and what it means to “talk right” in society.

If readers can explain what stuttering is, know why I chose to study it, and give a few examples of characters that stutter, they will have grasped the main point of this thesis.

When I decided I wanted to write a thesis, I knew it was going to be about stuttering in media. I did not know which artifacts to choose or where to begin, but I knew I wanted to talk about how stuttering is represented in film, television, and literature. After watching *It (2017)*, I knew I found my artifact, my central film for my thesis. This movie is not perfect. It does not represent stuttering in a wholly accurate way and it caters to some stereotypes, but overall, it is a good example of what stuttering representation can, and should, be.

*It (2017)* is just one artifact. There are dozens of examples of stuttering in media that need to be explored and researched. More research needs to be done concerning societal perceptions of
stuttering. More accessible information about stuttering, and other speech impediments, needs to be disseminated to the public.

Creators that choose to represent stuttering in their works should think about why and how they go about this. Using The Moses Test I created, creators can evaluate their own representations. Consumers of these representations can do the same. Critically examining media is an important part of creation and consumption. Creators might ask: How are we portraying a specific group? Why are we portraying them this way? Is this representation biased in any way? I think it is important for people to be informed about where certain representations come from and how they might impact society.

If I choose to continue this research, I would like to work on a larger project about language and identity. How we speak is just as important as what we say. People judge each other based on the way we talk, how our voice sounds, how we pronounce certain words, how we look when we make these sounds. There are all kinds of stereotypes associated with certain ways of speaking. Exploring these stereotypes would help further this research into marginalized ways of speaking. This is future-talk, though. Right now, I am wrapping up my discussion of stuttering in media and how stuttering is portrayed in It (2017). I hope that my discussion can provide you with insights into this topic.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

As stated in the Introduction, James Hunt called stuttering a “vicious utterance” in 1861. When I first read this, I was offended. But now, I agree with Hunt. Stuttering is violating. It goes against our society’s obsession with fluency and perfection. It can be uncomfortable, awkward, aggressive, and ugly. It is an act of subversion to stutter without shame. A stutterer who chooses not to fight their stutter is choosing to be themselves. While attaining fluency is a positive thing
for many people, myself included, we would do well to remember that fluency is not the “right” way of speaking. Speaking fluently makes communicating a lot easier, but it does not make it more right.

And now, in the words of Porky Pig, “Th-Th-The, Th-Th-The, Th-Th... That's all, folks!”
Appendix A: List of Screenshots

Screenshot 1: *IT* (2017) Screenshot: Bill builds a boat

Screenshot 2: Added by MurphyWiki to The Mayor’s Speech Wiki Page
(STUTTERS) Don't be a wuss.
He thrusts his fists against the posts...
(CONTINUES STUTTERING) Shit!

Screenshot 7: He thrusts his fists against the posts (3)

"Post."

Screenshot 8: He thrusts his fists against the posts (4)
Richie mocks Bill

A new croquet set.
Jeez, spit it out,
(MOCK STUTTERS) Bill!

Screenshot 9: Richie mocks Bill

RICHIE: Wow.

Screenshot 10: Bill doesn’t stutter (1)
BEN: What?

He didn’t stutter once.
(STUTTERS)
You all packed for Portland?

Screenshot 13: Final dialogue (1)

Yeah, pretty much.

Screenshot 14: Final dialogue (2)
I never felt like a loser when I was with all of you.

 Screenshot 15: Final dialogue (3)

(STUTTERS MOCKINGLY)
You say something, Billy?

 Screenshot 16: Henry Bowers mocks Bill
Screenshot 17: 90 pounds
Appendix B: List of Tables

Table 1: Wingate's 8 Statements answering, “Stuttering is...”

1. _________a morbidity of social consciousness, a hypersensitivity of social attitude, a pathological social response

2. _________the result of a conflict between opposed urges to speak and to hold back from speaking

3. _________the disorganization of normally fluent speech that is a consequence of conditioned emotion

4. _________a symptom of an emotionally disturbed personality that profoundly affects the physical, mental and emotional life

5. _________a habit of making elaborate preparations for speech on the assumption that it is a difficult and treacherous process

6. _________an anticipatory, apprehensive, hypertonic avoidance reaction

7. _________a psychoneurosis caused by a persistence into later life of early pregenital oral nursing, with oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic components

8. _________to speak or say with involuntary paused, spasms, and repetition of sounds and syllables
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Leadership*</th>
<th>Audibility*</th>
<th>Curability*</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>a strong leader, leads the Israelites, is chosen by God to lead people</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is concerned about his ability to speak, speaks through his brother</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, God does not cure him</td>
<td>Moses is a good representation of a person who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porky Pig</td>
<td>not a strong leader, a subordinate side character, but is widely recognized by Looney Tunes fans</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his speech is a signature part of his character, stutter very exaggerated</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, it is part of his characterization as a comic figure</td>
<td>Porky Pig is a neutral representation of a person who stutters that can be interpreted as positive or negative, or be reclaimed by stutterers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuttering Bob</td>
<td>not a leader, berated by male figures of authority, called a &quot;jailbird&quot; and treated as incompetent</td>
<td>speaks frequently, difficulty results in another character almost choking to death</td>
<td>is magically cured of his stutter when John Wayne berates him and gets Bob to call him a &quot;sos of a bitch&quot;</td>
<td>Stuttering Bob is a negative representation of a person who stutters, Bob is emasculated by his stutter and only becomes a &quot;real man&quot; when he &quot;stops that stuttering&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Pile</td>
<td>a main character, a right-hand man, respected by his associate but mocked by other characters, depicted as sensitive and a pushover for most of the plot, but he is depicted as someone we should root for</td>
<td>speaks frequently, does not really defend himself when mocked or teased by others</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, still stutters when he kills the villain, Otto</td>
<td>Ken Pile is a neutral representation of a person who stutters that can be interpreted as positive or negative, or be reclaimed by stutterers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Bibbit</td>
<td>not a leader, depicted as an insecure man with an unnatural attachment to his mother, weak-willed and sniveling</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is ashamed of his stutter, is berated by nursing staff and doctors</td>
<td>overcomes his stutter after having sex with a prostitute but relapses when the head nurse mentions his mother, kills himself at the end of the narrative</td>
<td>Billy Bibbit is a negative representation of a person who stutters, Billy is emasculated by his stutter and only gains confidence when he exerts sexual authority, he is depicted as weak and ultimately unable to function in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarta</td>
<td>not a leader, a rebel fighter, is entrusted with important tasks and deemed valuable enough to capture and interrogate</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is mocked by his friends and enemies</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, his inability to speak fluently results in his capture and death</td>
<td>Tarta is a neutral representation of a person who stutters, he is killed because of his stutter, but this might just be a device used to demonstrate the bigotry and horrors of fascism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Quirrell</td>
<td>a respected teacher at Hogwarts, seen as nervous and weak-willed</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is pitied by coworkers and students</td>
<td>loses his stutter when confronted by Harry Potter because his stutter is faked, used his stutter to make people think he was weak and harmless</td>
<td>Professor Quirrell is a negative representation of a person who stutters, he is a fluent speaker that uses stuttering as a tool to make himself appear weak and is ultimately revealed to be a manipulative villain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>not a leader, a right-hand woman, respected by fellow inmates but not by her husband</td>
<td>is selectively mute because of her stutter, does not stutter when she sings, only says 3 words in the show</td>
<td>loses his stutter, not being able to do this results in her meanness and lack of confidence, she is easily taken advantage of</td>
<td>Norma is a negative representation of a person who stutters, she never speaks and other characters think she is mute, the narrative never allows her to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Stamper</td>
<td>not a leader, depicted as meek and insecure, unable to defend himself</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his &quot;other personality&quot; berates him for stuttering and being weak</td>
<td>loses his stutter by the end of the narrative because his stutter’s failed, his “other personality” uses a stutter to garner sympathy</td>
<td>Aaron Stamper is a negative representation of a person who stutters, he is a deceptive criminal that uses stuttering as a way to make people think he is weak, innocent, and incapable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Footpath Killer</td>
<td>a leader, a malicious serial killer that plagues the FBI, kills 13 people, has low self-esteem</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is bullied for his stutter (this bullying is apparently what causes him to snap and become a serial killer), as FBI agent mocks him in order to catch him off guard</td>
<td>loses his stutter, is arrested by FBI agents</td>
<td>The Footpath Killer is a negative representation of a person who stutters, his stutter causes his low self-esteem and indirectly causes him to kill people, he is depicted as deranged, weak-willed, and traumatized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King George VI</td>
<td>a strong leader, king of England, respected by people</td>
<td>speaks frequently, is criticized for his stutter, is subjected to unhelpful and strange therapeutic practices, is afraid to read to his children and give speeches</td>
<td>loses his stutter, learns to use tools that help him speak more fluently, successfully gives a speech over the radio</td>
<td>King George VI is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he successfully leads his country, learns to work with and accept his stutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Billington</td>
<td>a well-respected mayor, frequently gives speeches</td>
<td>speaks frequently, given his speech even though he is nervous about his stutter, is encouraged by friends to talk how he talks</td>
<td>loses his stutter, accepts his stutter, gives a successful speech while stuttering</td>
<td>Mayor Billington is a positive representation of a person (or platitude) who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Walter Palmer</td>
<td>an Army Private that is constantly mocked by his fellow soldier</td>
<td>speaks frequently, but is hesitant to do so, his stutter results in an accident that wounds soldiers, is encouraged by Army doctor to accept his stutter</td>
<td>loses his stutter, learns that he is not incompetent</td>
<td>Private Walter Palmer is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he is told that his stutter has nothing to do with his intelligence, and is encouraged by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odin Arrow</td>
<td>a main character, respected by other characters (but not his family), depicted as powerful</td>
<td>speaks frequently, his stutter is rarely mentioned or mocked, it is just part of his character</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter (as of latest appearance)</td>
<td>Odin Arrow is a positive representation of a person who stutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Denbrough (from IT 2017)</td>
<td>leader of the Losers’ Club, main character, respected by other characters</td>
<td>speaks frequently, stutters while giving orders</td>
<td>does not lose/overcome his stutter, does not stutter when he gives an impassioned speech (which is questionable)</td>
<td>Bill Denbrough is a positive representation of a person who stutters, he does not lose his stutter after killing it and is not mocked by his friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Leadership: This refers to a character’s position in the narrative’s hierarchy. I look at the level of influence they have, how well-respected they are, and whether they are taken seriously.*

*Audibility: This refers to a character’s ability to freely express themselves. Thoughts can be expressed in a multitude of ways, from spoken language to sign language.*

*Curability: This refers to how pathologized a character’s stutter is. While stuttering is classified as speech disability, the label of disability does not equate to inferiority or a desire to be cured.*
Table 3: The Moses Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Requirement #1*</th>
<th>Requirement #2*</th>
<th>Requirement #3*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porky Pig</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuttering Bob</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Pile</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Bibbit</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarta</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Quirrell</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Stampler</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Footpath Killer</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King George VI</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Billington</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Walter Palmer</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odin Arrow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Denbrough</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(from IT 2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Requirement #1: the stutterer is not mocked by other characters for their stutter

*Requirement #2: the stutterer is not silenced by their stutter, meaning they audibly speak more than twice

*Requirement #3: the stutterer does not lose/overcome their stutter by the end of the narrative
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Stuttered*</th>
<th>Word Stuttered*</th>
<th>Word Stuttered*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wuss</td>
<td>Richie</td>
<td>wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vomit</td>
<td>we’ll</td>
<td>You’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>float</td>
<td>quarry</td>
<td>That’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she’s</td>
<td>just</td>
<td>Mrs. K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boats</td>
<td>Your</td>
<td>swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dick</td>
<td>I’m</td>
<td>we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrens</td>
<td>stay</td>
<td>take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>missing</td>
<td>can’t</td>
<td>It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suck</td>
<td>pick</td>
<td>Beverly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thrusts</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>stick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posts</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posts</td>
<td>Losers</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show</td>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s</td>
<td>thing</td>
<td>she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>forgotten</td>
<td>what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public</td>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>backyard</td>
<td>That’s</td>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>6 times = Georgie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgie</td>
<td>fucking</td>
<td>3 times = posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>thrusts</td>
<td>2 times = sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supplies</td>
<td>posts</td>
<td>2 times = swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thanks</td>
<td>ghosts</td>
<td>2 times = thrusts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Letters and Percentage of Stuttered Speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letters Stuttered</th>
<th>Percentage (%) of Stuttered Speech*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Bill’s stuttered speech is divided among these 17 letters.
Table 6: Why Does Bill Stutter

- **Out-of-Universe**
  - **Character Development**
    - "He has no defining 'negative' trait without it.'"
    - "...used to identify him as a sympathetic character with something to overcome."
  - **Author Intent**
    - "I'd like to think it was Stephen King trying to positively portray a demographic that is underrepresented in media."

- **In-Universe**
  - **Medical/Scientific Reasons**
    - "I think he stutters because his vocal chords are too tight."
    - "...a neurological quirk."

- **Fear/Emotions**
  - "Part of me thinks it was tied to fear due to the fact that they made a big deal out his fluent speech. But he did stutter at the end, so it can't be that."
  - "I think Bill stutters because he is uncertain."

- **Not Sure**
  - "I'm not sure what stuttering is connected to in speech research."
  - "I don't know, I guess some people just have a stutter."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Brave</th>
<th>Annoying</th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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