

Who are you?

Business



Recently I went trick or treating with my friends. It was fun to spend an evening donning a mask and pretending to be someone I was not. I liked the idea of not being recognized by people that I knew. What you may not realize is that Halloween is not the only night people wear masks.

In literature, movies, history and everyday life, people wear masks to hide their true identity. Daniel Keyes' novella *Flowers for Algernon* and J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* are two powerful literary examples of the idea that people wear masks to hide their true identity. In *Flowers for Algernon*, the main character is a mentally challenged man named Charlie Gordon who has an I. Q. of approximately 68.

The novella illustrates the tragic story of how Charlie becomes a genius for three months, only to lose his newfound I. Q. Throughout the period of three months, Charlie accomplishes many scientific breakthroughs regarding his experience and mental change. During his time studying, Charlie realizes that nobody is what he or she appears to be. Charlie concludes that everyone wants to be who they are not, or in some cases who they can never be. He illustrates this when he says, " It was if he'd hidden part of himself to deceive me, pretending to be what he is not.

No one I've ever known is what he appears to be on the surface." (Keyes, 367-368). This quote shows the irony of low self-confidence turning into a wish for something better by donning a mask. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the main character, Holden Caulfield, is a loner. He sticks to himself, and has few friends.

The book is about a time in Holden's life when he vocalizes his thoughts freely. One of his recurring thoughts is that many people are "phony". By calling people "phony" he means that they are not true people. Salinger's protagonist thinks their personalities are not real, or in essence wearing masks. Holden has little patience for phony people. Holden explains that "phonies" care only about themselves when wearing a mask.

Holden talks about how "All of these handsome guys are the same. When they are done combing their god damn hair, they beat it on you." (Salinger, 153). Holden believes that people who wear masks are extremely unkind. They are unkind because they are insecure with their real personality, and think that being mean makes them better or cooler than others. In the movie Avatar, people wear masks to hide their true identity.

Avatar goes further; one of its main messages is the idea that sometimes a mask can actually help a person discover their true identity. By pretending to be something that he is not, the main character, Jake Sully, learns who he really is. Jake Sully is a retired war veteran who is sent on a mission by the Sky People to infiltrate and ultimately destroy the Na'vi Tribe. When he tries to speak with Neytiri, a member of the Na'vi tribe, Jake is wearing the deepest mask of all, an Avatar; a different body. However Neytiri sees right through it and tell him he should not be there.

After having a long conversation with Neytiri, he asks her why she hasn't killed him yet: Neytiri: "You should not be here..." Jake: "Then why did you save me?" Neytiri: "You have a strong heart. No fear! But stupid! Ignorant like a child!" Jake: "Well, if I'm like a child, then maybe you should teach

me. Neytiri: “ Sky People can not learn, you don’t see.” Jake: “ Then teach me how to see.” This conversation shows that Neytiri is right; Jake is out of place in Na’vi.

It also shows that every mask can be penetrated if the person is willing to find out their true identity. Once Jake realizes that the Na’vi world is where he is the most comfortable, he tells the Sky People that “ they cannot take whatever they want” from the Na’vi. When he finally realizes that the ways of the Sky People are wrong, Neytiri is able to say to him “ I see you”. Neytiri is only able to say this because Jake’s realization has allowed him to see beyond his mask. He then feels part of Neytiri’s world and fully understands their concept of life. By having so much knowledge about not only the Sky People’s world but also his world, Jake is able to “ see” himself, thus enabling Neytiri to “ see” him.

Another example of people wearing masks to hide their true identity can be found in history. During World War II, many Jewish people were forced to hide their true identity or be killed by the Nazis. When Hitler rose to power, he treated Jews like barbaric criminals. Jews had to hide anywhere they could to prevent themselves from being killed. They either hid themselves completely or were forced to pretend that they were not Jewish. In order to survive, many Jews gave up their Jewish identity by changing their names and abandoning their religion.

Jewish people in hiding “ had to be extremely cautious in their everyday lives, not speaking of their past or their families for fear they might reveal that they were Jewish.” (Jewish Life During the Holocaust). With every means

of hiding people, there is always a way for others to penetrate one's means of hiding. The Nazis penetrated the Jews' masks by forcing Jewish adults to carry an I. D everywhere stating whom they were and what religion they belonged to. Because of this most adults could not hide easily.

On the other hand, Jewish children could easily be hidden, provided they were separated from their parents. As a result, during the Second World War many Jewish children were sent far away from their homes so the Nazis would not discover them. These children were forced to leave their families and home and assume new identities and religions in order to survive. Some Jewish people survived the Holocaust, but more than six million died horrible deaths despite their best efforts. Hitler's tyranny shows that although people wear masks to hide their true identity, in some extreme cases even masks cannot protect you.

Sometimes you have to face your true identity and the consequences it may bring. In everyday life, I constantly witness the theme that people wear masks to hide their true identity. I see examples of this in the halls at school, in the novels I read, and even in myself. A good example from my life is my years in grade school. At that time my best friend's name was Travers. We would do everything together, and the most important thing is that he always stayed by my side.

As our days of grade school drew to an end, I noticed his personality changing as he was introduced to a new bigger world of people. By the time we were both in fifth grade, we rarely saw each other. He started to hang out with other kids who he thought were somehow better than I. Even worse, he

started acting like he thought he was better than I. He had put on his mask of cockiness and superiority. In reality we were both equals and I believe he knew it.

He could fool others with his mask, but not me. I knew the real Travers. More importantly I knew that he could never live up to his mask. In literature, movies, history and everyday life people wear masks to hide their true identity. These masks take on different meaning depending on who is wearing the mask and what is happening in their world.

Sometimes people wear masks out of insecurity and other times out of necessity. Sometimes people wear masks to hide their true feelings or to fit in with a crowd. A mask can hide a person's anguish or make them appear confident and cocky. What I have learned is that wearing a mask will never work. You may be able to fool people who are new to you, but in the end you can never really hide your true identity.

Works Cited: Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2001. Print.

153 Keyes, Daniel, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Literature: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000. *Avatar*. Dir. James Cameron.

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