

# The Significance of a Trauma Survivor: The Representation of PTSD in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

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## *Abstract*

Mass media plays an important role in the dissemination of information regarding post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other forms of mental illness. The portrayal of characters with PTSD on television shows such as *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) has the potential to deliver educational and therapeutic benefits; it is important for individuals who have not had exposure to the disorder to see others experience it, and watching someone go through trauma can help those who have lived through their own. While he has not been diagnosed, this paper postulates that *GoT* character Theon Greyjoy has PTSD, and it examines the representation of this illness in the popular television program. This postulation is based on Theon's experiences and behaviours as well as on the five criteria identified for the diagnosis of PTSD outlined in the *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (*DSM-V*).

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The Home Box Office television series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) is known for its violent battles, controversial romances, and sexually explicit scenes. There are more than a dozen complex main characters with ever changing morals, often making it difficult for audiences to fully love or fully hate them. This is true of Theon Greyjoy, a lord from the Iron Islands of the country Westeros (an "ironborn"), who fights alongside his best friend, betrays him, and gets captured and tortured. His journey is long, hard, and not one from which he emerges unscathed. Indeed, as the seasons rolled by, it became evident to a number of viewers – myself included – that Theon can be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As a main character on a popular show, Theon is arguably an important emblem for people who have been diagnosed with PTSD or another mental illness. The way he views himself, the way others treat him, and the way he copes or does not cope with his illness can help or harm audiences' understanding of such

illnesses. Furthermore, the trauma he experiences helps create empathy within those who have not undergone such an event, as they often find it hard to believe that someone who has experienced it is not exaggerating the severity of the event and its after-effects (McNally 203-204). The representation of PTSD in *Game of Thrones* is thus important and necessary to promote empathy towards people with mental illnesses, as well as to encourage self-love and hope in people who have one, because Theon's journey calls attention to the day-to-day lives of real people who struggle to be heard and understood.

Unfortunately, scholarly work on *GoT* is scarce. What has been written typically analyzes the portrayal of its female, not male, characters, often in relation to gender and sex. As a result, the scholarly material in this paper comes from more general articles that discuss mental health and PTSD, rather than mental health/PTSD *and GoT*. There are other sources that deal with both, but these come in the form of fan articles and interviews with the cast and crew of the show. Regardless of the lack of scholarly sources on *GoT*, the sources that pertain to the topic discussed here provide a valuable insight into Theon's journey and its impact on audiences.

Before analyzing Theon, it is important to understand what PTSD is and how someone comes to be diagnosed with it. PTSD became an official diagnosable illness after the Vietnam war, when psychiatrists started to believe the war itself was what caused mental health issues, rather than something pre-existing being heightened by it (McNally 179-180). After conducting more studies, medical professionals realized the same set of symptoms in war veterans with PTSD can appear in those who have experienced other "terrifying, life-threatening stressors," such as sexual abuse (McNally 181). Since, five criteria have been identified for the diagnosis of PTSD and are included in the *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (*DSM-V*): A) "[e]xposure [sic] to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" by experiencing it themselves, seeing someone else experience it, learning a close family member

or friend has experienced it, or repeatedly being exposed to details of traumatic events (as a first responder would be; McNally 188); B) intrusion, meaning the patient experiences their symptoms repeatedly; C) avoidance of anything that can bring back the experience of the trauma; D) cognition and mood changes, such as numbing, blaming, and negative emotions that impact daily life; and E) change to arousal and reactivity, resulting in phenomena such as hypervigilance or recklessness (McNally 181-182). For a diagnosis to be possible, Criterion A must be present, while symptoms in the other criteria have to occur for more than one month and regularly impact daily life (McNally 181, 182). As will be made clear, Theon fits the criteria and the time stipulation for such a diagnosis to be made.

To be clear, Theon has not been diagnosed in the show itself. While other fans have stipulated that he does have PTSD, it is in no way official. Therefore, I postulate that Theon has PTSD rather than declare it, based on the *DSM-V*, and on the character's experiences and behaviours.

The trauma Theon experiences is intense, violent, and effective, as it not only physically harms him, but results in the creation of the obedient and unquestioning Reek, the persona attributed to Theon by his abuser. According to Lilla Hárđi and Adrienn Kroó, torture is designed “to cause severe pain and suffering in order to destroy the structure of the personality and the identity of the victim” (133), and to make the victim “accept the torturer’s construction of reality and become submissive” (134). It is clear in the pilot episode that Theon is over-confident and cocky, and the audience slowly watches this dissolve while he is being tortured. From the moment he is tied to a cross and physically harmed (“Dark Wings, Dark Words”), to the moment he declares “My name is... Reek” (“Mhysa” 20:41), *GoT* adheres to the design of torture as outlined above. In the episode “Dark Wings, Dark Words,” the audience gets a glimpse of Theon’s future while he is interrogated and tortured. Theon screams and begs to no avail, wearing

away at his confidence and willpower. At least five people are in the room witnessing this infliction of pain, perhaps with the goal of showing Theon that no one cares about what he is going through. Thus begins the process of destroying his identity from someone of high status to someone who means nothing.

In the same episode and the two to follow (“Walk of Punishment” and “And Now His Watch is Ended”), Theon is given false hope by an unknown man, later revealed to be Ramsay Snow, who ordered Theon’s torture and is his principal abuser. Ramsay acts the part of a sympathetic servant, aghast at what the others are doing to Theon, and helps him “escape.” When Ramsay comes to untie him in “Walk of Punishment,” Theon’s breathing accelerates in panic before seeing who it is. This suggests he has been trained to believe that when someone enters the room, pain will follow. However, when he is taken off the cross, Theon’s confidence returns and he is determined to escape, proving he has not been broken as of yet. Ramsay proves time and again on this “escape” that he can be trusted to the point where Theon divulges politically important information to him in “And Now His Watch is Ended.” Believing Ramsay to be taking him to his older sister, Yara, Theon is horrified when he is brought back to the torture room instead. Before being tied up, Ramsay orders new torturers to “[p]ut [Theon] back where he belongs” (“And Now His Watch is Ended” 22:48). As a result, Theon is remade a victim, is shown he cannot put faith in those who show him kindness, and is told that he is good for nothing but to be tortured. So continues the endeavour to debase and dehumanize him.

These episodes are followed by more torture, most significantly maiming. In “The Climb”, Ramsay provides Theon with a false hope of avoiding physical harm through a guessing game in which Theon must guess where they are and who his abuser is. Despite initially telling him he guessed correctly, Ramsay maims Theon’s hand, revealing Theon guessed incorrectly. Theon is therefore shown again that he cannot trust anyone, and that Ramsay will hurt him no

matter what he does. The second episode involves Ramsay using women and sex against Theon, two things Theon is known to love. When two women approach him, Theon is terrified and frantically asks, “[w]here is he?... Who sent you?” while searching for signs of his tormentor (“The Bear and the Maiden Fair” 36:15, 36:33). He slowly relaxes and becomes at ease, only to have Ramsay blow a bugle horn, used in “The Climb” to wake him from sleep, to interrupt the moment. Ramsay states, “Everyone knows you love girls. I bet you always thought they loved you back” (“The Bear and the Maiden Fair” 39:30), debasing Theon to someone who is not loveable. The scene ends with a sort of punishment for Theon being who he is when Ramsay has a few men cut off Theon’s penis. In doing so, he is stripped of an aspect of himself that had come to define him.

The next time we see Theon, he is desperate for Ramsay to kill him. When Ramsay refuses him, we see that Theon is broken by the knowledge of having to live. It is at this moment that Ramsay comes in and deals the final blow, forcing Theon to accept the name Reek, because he is, according to Ramsay, “just... meat” (“Mhysa” 19:30), not a person. To return to the aims of torture put forward by Hárði and Kroó, Ramsay “causes severe pain” to tear down Theon’s identity (133), makes him “helpless, intimidated... and desperate” (133), and makes Theon “accept [his own] construction of reality,” one in which Theon is nothing more than his submissive pet (134).

The effects of this dehumanizing torture take a mental and physical toll on Theon. He hardly makes eye contact with anyone, especially Ramsay; he constantly twitches and rarely blinks; he follows Ramsay around and does what he’s told; and his eyes seem distant, as though he has retreated into himself. He is frequently reminded of his worthlessness by Ramsay and others around him with titles like “pet rat” (“The Lion and the Rose” 12:57), and “this creature” (“The Lion and the Rose” 13:28). He is even reminded that he is not “Theon” but “Reek” when

Ramsay forces him to play the part of his former self to reclaim a holdfast for Ramsay's father ("The Mountain and the Viper"). As a result, Theon steadfastly declares he is Reek when faced with people from his past. When Yara tries to rescue him and calls him "Theon," he, terrified, yells, "I'm Reek! Loyal Reek! Good Reek! I've always been Reek!" ("The Laws of Gods and Men" 13:33) Later, when Sansa Stark, a young lady with whom Theon grew up and who is like a younger sister to him, asks for help to escape Ramsay herself, he again insists that he is Reek, not Theon ("The Gift" 6:55-6:57). This aligns with a further point from Hárði and Kroó, which claims "the internalization of the torturer's attitude... has severe consequences concerning the survivor's self-image, self-esteem, and identity" (133). As Theon believes he is Reek and sees himself as nothing more than Ramsay's loyal pet, he demonstrates how torture is internalized, going beyond physical harm and encroaching on a person's mental life.

Eventually, Sansa's dire situation spurs Theon into helping her escape Winterfell, the seat of Westeros' North, held by Ramsay, and escaping with her. During this scene, Theon makes willing and steady eye contact with her, suggesting he is ready to shed Reek and reclaim Theon ("Mother's Mercy"). However, being physically removed from the situation does not mean Theon has escaped from the effects of years of torture. This is where the evidence of PTSD begins to arise. It is without question that Theon has experienced a traumatic event, satisfying Criterion A. Criterion B, persistent symptoms, are shown a number of times after he and Sansa escape Winterfell. The symptoms are especially visible when he and Yara are in Volantis, a city outside Westeros in which they hide from their vengeful uncle, Euron, in the episode "The Broken Man". While the siblings sit in a marketplace surrounded by prostitutes, Theon jumps every time one comes near him, avoids eye contact with them, and constantly glances over his shoulder. This suggests he is recalling the false seduction before his castration in "The Bear and the Maiden Fair", triggering the re-emergence of his symptoms. According to McNally, his

behaviour in the marketplace also fits with Criterion C, avoidance. Not only does he avoid the women themselves, he tries to avoid what they make him think of, even if there is no suggestion of harm. Fear from trauma can resurface at any point, especially when the stressor was “unpredictable and uncontrollable”, two things Ramsay makes certain of. As a result, Theon’s mind is constantly vigilant to possible threats because he never knew when they would come while being tortured (McNally 191-192). In the presence of women trying to seduce him, this fear would only be heightened, and the lack of eye contact physically displays his avoidance strategy. Moreover, since Theon is hypervigilant to any advances and on edge, this scene also demonstrates Criterion E.

The remaining criterion, Criterion D, is less overt. However, Theon constantly reminds others that he has done bad things in the past, putting himself down. Had he not captured Winterfell and subsequently killed two children, believed by the public to be the brothers of the King in the North, there is a chance Theon would not have been captured by Ramsay’s men. As a result, Theon’s negative and blameful mind frame can relate to his trauma if he sees his past deeds as a direct cause of it. By being in this mindset, Theon satisfies the final Criterion.

Evidently, from our point of view, Theon’s trauma is lasting and pervasive. The symptoms outlined above appear not only while he is Ramsay’s captive, but months and years after his escape. However, not all the show’s characters see it this way, nor do select viewers. Turning again to the marketplace scene in “The Broken Man,” Yara urges Theon to return to who he once was by telling him, “I know you’ve had some bad years... But I’m tired of watching you cower like a beat dog” (35:59-36:05), and, “I need you. The real Theon Greyjoy, not this rat-shit pretender. Can you find him for me?... You [escaped] and you’re never going back” (36:11-36:28). To top it off, she tells him, albeit gently, to kill himself if he cannot fix the problem (36:44-36:56). Yara exemplifies the belief that those who have PTSD should be able to simply

move past the trauma. Similarly, a number of audience members took to Twitter proclaiming Theon a “coward” and a “selfish man” after he jumps ship during the battle at sea in “Stormborn” when he sees Euron has a knife to Yara’s throat and Euron’s men are killing everyone on board (Willingham). Yara’s reaction may simply display the attitude ironborn have towards trauma, but the audience reactions prove why Theon’s experience is important to show in today’s society: not enough people understand that PTSD is not something you can simply get over, potentially in part because of characters like Yara who proclaim otherwise.

Not exempt from the assumption that Theon could return to his former self after a few years of distance are the show’s creators. In an interview following the episode “Stormborn,” creator and writer D.B. Weiss addressed why it was necessary for Theon to leave Yara to Euron. Weiss noted how he and the other writers “realized that you don’t just get over what happened to Theon, that’s something that’s... going to be a part of him for the rest of his life” (“Inside Game of Thrones”). Upon realizing this, it makes sense for Theon to escape the confines of the burning vessel as he watches Euron’s men torture Yara’s and kill for fun. Euron even emulates Ramsay in this scene with a gleeful look in his eyes in response to the carnage. Theon is visibly affected, and reverts to Reek before us – his eyes glaze over in retreat, he stops blinking, he twitches, he avoids eye contact, and his breathing becomes ragged. Once away from the ship, he is calmer albeit sad, with his eyes more focused and his breathing returned to normal. This moment displays what some people go through when their PTSD is triggered, thus providing a learning opportunity for *GoT* fans who have not had exposure to PTSD.

This scene depicts what Alfie Allen, the actor who plays Theon, calls “conflicting emotions” between the battle confidence he seems to have regained, and the torment he associates with violence and blood (Morton). This is perhaps in part why viewers believed Theon to be cowardly when he jumps. Between Volantis and the battle on the ship, Theon’s confidence

grows. Yara looks to him for advice and protection; he makes eye contact with most everyone, including powerful strangers like Queen Daenerys in “Battle of the Bastards”; his posture is better, standing straight with his head held high rather than hunched over; and he fights well in the first moments of the ship battle. However, none of this prepares him to face his biggest triggers – senseless killing and psychopathic torturers – and so there should not have been the expectation that he would not react negatively to them. In PTSD, “[r]ecollection of the [original traumatic] event is involuntary, intrusive, and emotionally distressing, more akin to reliving it than merely recalling it” (McNally 181). Theon is thus faced with the choice of continuing to relive the horrors of his trauma or to escape them, thereby relieving his distress. His decision to leave also recalls the criteria of PTSD, namely the intrusive nature of the symptoms and avoidance. As the battle occurs years after his escape from Winterfell, *GoT* outlines how people with PTSD can experience the effects of their trauma for a long time.

This nuanced and convincing portrayal of a mental illness and of living with it is important for modern audiences to watch. Since it is such a realistic display of PTSD, people who do not have the disease are able to better understand why and how it occurs, as well as come to see that trauma is not something easily forgotten, no matter how hard one tries.

Though the remainder of the paper discusses the importance of the portrayal of PTSD in *GoT* as an educational tool for those who do not have it or who are not exposed to it and as a therapeutic output for those who do have PTSD, simply watching the show does not guarantee either of these benefits. In other words, an educational framework accompanying the series may be needed, such as videos about PTSD featuring characters like Theon, before some viewers can appreciate the portrayal or become aware of the presence of the mental illness in the show. Furthermore, the therapeutic benefits are strictly a potentiality in that they hinge upon viewers

identifying Theon as someone with PTSD. Therefore, the place Theon may hold in raising awareness for and helping people cope with PTSD is entirely viewer-dependent.

Television plays a central role in the distribution of knowledge on and around mental health, especially such wide-spread shows as *GoT*. Anne E. Robbins notes in her dissertation, *A Role for Media in Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness*, that “mass media are considered the primary source” of information when it comes to mental illness, especially for those “who have had no direct experience with [it]” (23). She goes on to explain how the portrayal of mental illness and the stereotypes that surround it in television impact how audiences act towards mental health and illness, meaning negative portrayals can be damaging for people who live with a mental illness (Robbins 24). Her dissertation discusses how most portrayals are negative in one way or another, and how mass media needs to correct this to improve patients’ “life chances and recovery possibilities” (Stuart qtd. in Robbins 37). Theon is an important figure in this fight against negative portrayals of mental illnesses, because of the accuracy and the sympathetic approach taken. This is not to say the portrayal is perfect; Theon refers to himself as a “coward” for leaving Yara (“The Dragon and the Wolf” 49:34), other ironborn see him as craven, etc. That said, Theon’s life with PTSD shows how he is not dangerous (a common misconception about people with a mental illness; Robbins 26), and illustrates how he can live a relatively normal life in spite of it.

It is not just speculation that characters like Theon have a positive impact for the outlook on mental illness. Kim Renfro admits in her article “In Defense of Theon Greyjoy and His Actions During This Week’s Big ‘Game of Thrones’ Battle” that she was initially frustrated with Theon for jumping ship. She believed this was a sign that he is losing progress as a character because he had shown confidence in earlier episodes. However, her opinion changed after taking to Twitter and finding positive feedback for the scene. She quotes @GameOverRos, who

tweeted, “One person I haven’t credited with Theon’s scene - @b\_cogman [the writer of “Stormborn”]. Thank you. You did mental illness right. And I’m proud to be a fan today.” From words like these, Renfro believes the audience needs to consider how Theon’s journey is representative of someone with PTSD rather than an act of cowardice, even if those come to be Theon’s own words. Allen has also had people come up to him and tell him their personal stories. One that he recounts in an interview comes from a woman who is abused by her husband. She told Allen “[Theon’s abuse is] not pathetic, and it gives me strength,” which made him understand that he has “responsibilities as an actor” (Willingham). It is thus undeniably necessary that the depiction of trauma and life post-trauma on television must be treated with care and respect because it has a real impact on audiences beyond a disturbing moment in an entertaining production.

Theon’s significance is further noted by professionals. AJ Willingham discussed trauma shown on *GoT* with therapist, relationship coach, and writer Sharie Stines. Stines explains how triggers can result in a person who has experienced trauma splitting into personas, what she calls “modes”, to protect themselves. This is why Reek emerges on the ship, as he can best protect Theon when he faces some of his worst triggers. Therefore, by having Theon revert to Reek, Cogman and the team portrayed a realistic element of PTSD to millions of viewers world-wide, teaching them about the illness without explicitly saying so. Furthermore, Stines asserts that people who have lived through trauma can be helped by watching someone go through their own (Willingham). Hence, the woman who approached Allen is not the only one to receive strength through Theon’s experiences. This vicarious interaction helps some trauma survivors work through self-belittling and show them that they are not alone in how they feel. Ergo, Theon presents not only a potential means to teach people about the real consequences of PTSD, but also a potential source of therapeutic relief.

Despite these positives, could the depiction of Theon actually be harmful for the perceptions of PTSD and other mental illnesses? Perhaps, especially when diction is taken into consideration. There is a frequent use of, and allusion to the word “coward” in relation to Theon’s actions. This makes it seem as though Theon chooses to be afraid and to avoid violent situations, ignoring the presence of triggers. This word could make people with PTSD and other trauma-related illnesses feel misunderstood or worthless. It can also teach people who do not have contact with these illnesses that trauma is not something someone should harbour forever, as though it is an active decision. This interpretation would align Theon with the negative portrayals of mental illness addressed by Robbins. She notes that it is not only violence and physical difference that can alienate viewers from these characters, but the language associated with them. According to H. Stuart, negative terminology “denigrate[s], segregate[s], alienate[s] and denote[s]... inferior status” (qtd. in Robbins 27). If terminology is used in productions to belittle specific characters in the eyes of other characters, it is understandable that someone with a mental illness watching the action could feel attacked. Moreover, it would come as no surprise for someone without an illness to begin using similarly negative diction towards someone who is mentally ill.

Despite this possibility, even the scenes that use negative language to describe Theon’s actions do not, by their end, portray him as inferior. The last use of the word “coward” in reference to Theon is when he rallies his men to save Yara from Euron in “The Dragon and the Wolf,” the season seven finale. In this scene, he is confident when he stands up to ironborn Harrag, who refuses to take orders from the man who abandoned Yara out of what Harrag believes to be weakness. He physically and verbally attacks Theon and says he will kill him if Theon does not stand down. Instead, Theon fights back. Even a consequence of Theon’s torture – his castration – becomes a strength when Harrag knees him in the groin with no result, confusing

him and giving Theon the upper hand. Theon's actions suggest he is something other than cowardly, therefore negating the term he uses moments before his display of fortitude. Overall, this scene, especially in comparison to the final moments in "Stormborn," proves that someone with PTSD is not weak, only unexpectedly triggered.

Another positive impact Theon can have on viewers is in regards to those who have been bullied. Though not a form of intense torture like he undergoes, bullying can be psychologically damaging and make a victim feel less-than. When a victim, particularly a child, does not live up to societal norms for behaviour and interaction, which are frequently altered as a result of their experiences, they are punished by society by way of exclusion (Hunka 83, 89). This is because the "onus [is] on the [victim] to participate in civic life... unless she connects, gives... she will be deemed a failure" (Hunka 89). This is much like how Yara expects Theon should return to his pre-trauma self as though nothing has happened, which ultimately makes Theon believe the same. The onus is placed on him to get better, to think of revenge, what Yara promises him in "The Broken Man," later, and concentrate on different matters in the present. However, his perception of the world is different from what it used to be, different from someone who has not been traumatized, and Yara, as well as the audience, should respect that (Hunka 89). Someone who was or is being bullied is likely to appreciate this and see a link between what they experienced and what Theon experiences, at least a little, since, again, his torture is not the same as being bullied. *GoT* thus presents another mirror for someone who is struggling, and they can become inspired as they watch Theon find strength to stand up against people who would do him or his family harm.

For Emily Hunka, a big step in coping with trauma like bullying is to find a support group and to know that there are people who care about you. She says this is where "children [read: bullying victims] can acquire stronger chances at happiness," along with other coping strategies

(88). I highlight this strategy in particular, for it pertains to Theon's journey. As previously explained, Ramsay convinces Theon that no one cares about him. Part of Theon's healing, then, is to prove to himself that others do in fact care, and that he has people he can trust. From the outset, he knows he can rely on Yara, since she is the only one who attempted a rescue while he was Ramsay's captive ("The Dragon and the Wolf" 48:01-48:21). Importantly, though, the audience witnesses Jon Snow, one of Theon's best friends and member of the family Theon betrayed, say to him, "It's not my place to forgive you for all of [the bad you've done]. But what I can forgive, I do" ("The Dragon and the Wolf" 47:35). While not in reference to the trauma Theon faced, this forgiveness deeply touches him and, I believe, lends him strength to face Hurrig in the next scene. As Hunka states, "a genuine wellbeing is dependent on others... without any requirement to work for it" (101-102). This helps us cope with hardships, find strength where we did not think we had any, and believe in ourselves. Though Theon had to work for forgiveness for his betrayals, Jon's friendly demeanour implies that Theon will have his support from now on, without the need to prove himself time and again. M. Başıođlu also discusses the importance of social support, claiming a lack of it can result in "helplessness and hopelessness", leading to "anxiety and depression" (Hárdi and Kroó 136). The strength gained from social interaction is visible in Theon, who proves capable of believing in himself with the knowledge that he has Yara, Jon, and perhaps Sansa, who places her implicit trust in him upon their escape from Winterfell.

By displaying Theon finding a social circle and people who care about him, *GoT* may be providing hope for people who feel they have none. Theon is debased, devalued, and torn down for years to a point where it almost appeared as though he would not make it out alive. To see him rise and live despite the trauma and his PTSD is inspirational, and proves that being hurt by someone else does not mean you are not worthy of relationships. While there is a good amount of

work to do, especially in regards to how Yara views him, the confidence she has in him and the kindness shown to him by Jon are enough for him to counter feelings of unworthiness, and hopefully do the same for people with similar feelings who watch him.

Theon's journey is not over yet, with the final season of *GoT* set to air in April 2019. This gives plenty of opportunity to have Theon change his opinions about himself and his triggered actions, to have other characters stop perceiving him as weak, and for him to take next steps in treating his PTSD. Though the first two may be optimistic, it being the notoriously painful *GoT*, after all, the third is easily achievable. Hárði and Kroó discuss treatment models and therapies that help trauma survivors and people with PTSD better cope with stressors and triggers. They claim that in all treatment models, telling another person the story and the emotions around it can help someone who went through a traumatic experience make sense of and assign meaning to it (Hárði and Kroó 137). As of yet, Theon has not divulged much information to anyone, although he may have done so off screen to Yara prior to "The Broken Man." Since there is no concrete information of such a discussion taking place, it seems unlikely. As such, opening up may help Theon view himself as something other than a coward – perhaps as a survivor, a fighter, and someone who can be redeemed from the bad things he did prior to his capture.

By portraying Theon as a complex, troubled character with charms and flaws, the writers of *GoT* have created a character with whom the audience can sympathize. While not everyone has empathy for him at all times, particularly when he is triggered, the remaining episodes have time to prove that mental illness is not something that simply "goes away" and that someone can "get over" traumatic experiences once they are physically removed from the situation. Moreover, the positive feedback the show has received suggests that more characters with properly represented mental illnesses are needed in popular culture. If Theon has helped people cope with their own trauma, to find hope for themselves, or to find someone with whom to relate, should

there not be more like him in fictional worlds? Sympathetic characters like Theon Greyjoy are needed in the fight against the stigma around mental illness because they prove that it can impact anyone, be triggered at unexpected times, and that those who have an illness are worthy of our care and support for one simple reason – they are human, too.

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