

How Dissociative Identity Disorder is Accurately Portrayed in *Petals of a Rose*

Dylan Crumpler

September 19, 2021

In this paper I will explain Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and how it is realistically displayed through the characters and story of my upcoming thesis film *Petals of a Rose*. I am making this film to show how this condition affects the abuse survivor's everyday life, inherently educating the viewer through the visuals, ending explanation, and overall experience. I will provide sources where applicable, although I have received much of this information through conversations with my mother, who has DID, and through interacting with her various identities.

DID is a condition that affects people who experienced trauma as a young child, usually before the age of eight: either sexual, physical, or emotional abuse or neglect. As a coping mechanism in response to trauma, the mind separates feelings, personality traits, characteristics, and memories, into separate compartments, which then develop into unique personality states/identities/dissociated "parts." Each identity can have its own name, personal history, and mannerism (*What Is AnInfiniteMind.com*). 1-3% of the global population have a dissociative disorder (ISST-D, "DID Awareness Day").

In *Petals of a Rose*, the titular protagonist, Rose, was sexually abused by her grandfather throughout her early childhood. To cope with this horror, Rose's brain dissociated, creating the identity Josie, who took on the memories, feelings, and experience of the abuse instead of Rose. Throughout her life, whether from "big T" or "little t" traumas, Rose's mind has continued to use

this coping mechanism, resulting in such characters as Axel and Superwoman, as well as the various parts who speak up in the grocery store at the meat counter, and who Rose talks to before going to bed (*Fact Sheet IV* isst-d.org).

The use of language regarding the body and the identities is extremely important. The body does not belong to one identity in particular. The body is just the body; it is not Rose's or Axel's or anyone else's. Rose is the host and primary personality, the identity who is present and in control of the body most of the time. When another identity takes over, this is called fronting. Other personality states tend to front in response to a trigger or another external stimulus: such as when Josie becomes excited over the bear, or when Axel becomes defensive from the teenage grocery clerk. When another identity fronts the host is no longer in control of the body. If the host is still nearby, aware of what the fronting identity is doing—such as when Rose is talking with Josie in the grocery store, or when Rose tries to regain control from Axel in the bathroom—that is called “co-consciousness,” as the host is aware of what is going on, but not in control.

It is not uncommon for people with DID to experience amnesia, as there is no guarantee that the host will be co-conscious when another part fronts, which, again, can happen at random. The activities which occur during this period of amnesia can only be remembered by the identity fronting during that period, or any other part which may be nearby or co-conscious. Amnesia is displayed in the film when Rose returns from the grocery store and only then discovers all of the pieces her identities picked out.

Together these identities form the “internal system”; and although they share the same physical body, their memories and experiences are each their own. Identities can talk to and interact with one another within the system, sharing or retrieving information another might not

have. It is important to note that unlike schizophrenia, in which the individual has hallucinations and impossible delusions of the outside world, or hear people and things that aren't really there, DID affects a person's relationship with that which/who is within their mind, not anyone or (imaginary) thing outside of the mind. Josie and Axel are not delusions projected onto the outside world, or imaginary voices "heard" in one's mind. Josie and Axel are real individuals who share a body, and come and go at will (*What Is AnInfiniteMind.com*).

These alternate personality states are just as real as you and me. They are not flashback memories, or emotions from trauma that have yet to be healed; they are true individuals with unique personalities of their own. While I may be connected with my inner child, and my behavior may change upon seeing a cool dinosaur, I still know it is 2021 and that I am 23 years old. In contrast, when Josie, a three year old¹, comes out/fronts, she is still under the impression that it is 1993, the year she was created as a response to the abuse. Josie will remain in control of the body, an action known as "fronting," until she gives control back to the host, Rose.

Each alternate personality state/part has a purpose for existing, and this purpose aligns with their own identity. Rose is an "apparently normal" part, an identity who manages everyday life and does not normally hold traumatic memories. Josie, a child, is a "little" part; she talks and behaves exactly how Rose did when she was three years old. Not all parts are a reflection of the host, however. Axel is an "introject," a part which takes on the shape of another person. Through the personification of one of Rose's abusers, Axel, in a twisted way, is protecting Rose by "keeping her in line," in order to protect her from other similar abusers. Superwoman is another introject, personifying a fictitious superhero. Superwoman is also an apparently normal part,

¹ (In the original draft Josie was three. However, she will be cast older to comply with production regulations.)

fronting when Rose may feel overwhelmed, such as when Rose is overwhelmed in the grocery store and Superwoman takes over, making the decision for her about which meat to buy.

Superwoman feels shame for the abuse Rose and the system have undergone. Because of this shame, Superwoman is a high achiever and a perfectionist, seeking to prove she is worthy. While not displayed in the film, some parts can speak languages the host has never studied, like Spanish, or have their own disability like diabetes, which is only active when the part is fronting or nearby. It is also possible for an animal part to be created in response to the death of a pet (*Alter Identities* Trauma Dissociation).

In order to heal from the disorder and disruption the various identities are causing, the host must undergo a specialized therapeutic process, working with each part to process their traumas, helping each be seen and heard (*The Process* Broady, Kathy). At the end of the film Rose is working her program of recovery, having a dialogue with her parts to reassure them and resolve their conflicts. She also has an inner dialogue with Axel in the bathroom. To calm both her and Axel down, Rose uses a coping technique called “grounding.” She uses her senses, such as sight and touch, to observe her world and become grounded in the present time. It is important to show these coping techniques so the audience can understand that this condition is actually treatable.

I hope *Petals of a Rose* will give people with DID a new face in the media, accurately representing those with a condition that has been misportrayed so many times, while also serving as quality entertainment (*From Split* Rose, Steve).

Bibliography

- "Alter Identities in Dissociative Identity Disorder (MPD) and DDNOS." *Trauma Dissociation*, 16 Apr. 2016, traumadissociation.com/alters.
- Broadly, Kathy. "The Process of Healing Dissociative Identity Disorder." *Discussing Dissociation*, 20 Sept. 2021, www.discussingdissociation.com/2021/09/the-process-of-healing-dissociative-identity-disorder/.
- "DID Awareness Day." *Youtube*, ISST-D, 8 Mar. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2QtK9uRohU.
- "Fact Sheet IV - What Are the Dissociative Disorders?" *ISST-D*, 4 Mar. 2020, www.isst-d.org/public-resources-home/fact-sheet-iv-what-are-the-dissociative-disorders/.
- Rose, Steve. "From Split to Psycho: Why Cinema Fails Dissociative Identity Disorder." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 Jan. 2017, www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/12/cinema-dissociative-personality-disorder-split-james-mcavoy.
- "What Is a Dissociative Disorder?" *An Infinite Mind*, Jamie Pollack, 2008, [www.aninfinitemind.com/about DID.html](http://www.aninfinitemind.com/about_DID.html).

IN SUMMARY: DID is a condition that affects people who experienced trauma as a young child, usually before the age of eight: either sexual, physical, or emotional abuse or neglect. As a coping mechanism the brain creates a new identity to hold the memories, feelings, and experiences in response to trauma. These identities are not imaginary, schizophrenic delusions, or PTSD triggered flashbacks; they are real individuals like you and me, with their own personalities, mannerisms, dialects, and memories. When another identity takes over, or “fronts,” the host/primary identity may experience amnesia until regaining control. Mental health conditions are often misportrayed in the media; people with DID are often shown as individuals who are actually violent murderers, when really this could not be further from the truth. We are living in a world where mental health is becoming increasingly important to understand; it is a shame there is much misinformation and negative stigma associated with it still today.