NEAR: HOW I FEEL UNINTENTIONALLY SEEN

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I AM AUTISTIC, AND MY FAVORITE SHOW IS *DEATHNOTE*. HENCE WHY I WROTE AN ESSAY ON IT.

The character of Near in *Deathnote* should be the example for other neurodivergent representation in media, specifically in art mediums. Despite a diagnosis not being officially established in the show, many autistic readers, using both psychology methods and referring back to their own experiences, express how they can find themselves relating to this character. Near in the narrative is a high- ranked detective, using his comprehension and intellect, along with the people around him to take down a mass murderer by the alias Kira, who hands out justice by writing names in a notebook. As someone reading the manga through autistic lens, his character is so significant because he feels authentic. He doesn't fall into the trope of living his life like any allistic with "just a few quirks," as he possesses habits and traits that stray from typicality, and uses various accommodations. On the other hand, he's not seen as a tragedy or less than to the other protagonists, as he shines through all of his successes. He's authentic and relatable, without trapping him in a boxed-in label.

To explore the concept of interpreting him as autistic, I am analyzing him based on the *DSM-5* routine of diagnosing. Despite this source material being shunned by a few, as it was imperative in the process of them getting their own prognosis, it will serve as a medically approved baseline and justification for the points made later on in the article.

The first part of the *DSM-5* in regards to an autism diagnosis is along the following:

[1]*Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text) Presenting two of the three:*

- *Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.*

- *Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.*

- *Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.*

In the first chapter we meet him, which is a flashback scene, Near seems secluded by his peers, not turning his gaze when other people at the orphanage walk by. When asked by his peers if he wants to go out and play, he stays stoic in the way he was sitting, not making eye contact. He replies shortly and denies any interest in social interaction. In the same scene, he is called to the office of the institution and informed that a character named L, who was a mentor for everyone in the orphanage, had passed. While another character in the room threw a fit and started asking questions, Near just stayed where he was, seeming more interested in the puzzle he was working on. This isn't because of lack of care, as Near attributes gratitude and credit to L as he solves his own cases in the future, and verbally expresses his respect for him later in the series. Instead, his behavior does not adjust to the situation that was happening, only having one line to attribute to the situation. Even a careless, neurotypical teen would acknowledge what a proper reaction would be and express it. In this one chapter, Near already presents all three traits that are represented in the first part of the DSM-5 classifications. Throughout the series, we see these behaviors repeated, such as poor eye contact, reduced range of expressions, and difficulty adjusting to social situations.

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[1] *DSM-5(R) Guidebook: The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014).

The second part of the *DSM-5* in regards to an autism diagnosis is along the following:

[2]Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

- *Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases)*

- *Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).*

- *Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).*

- *Hyper- or hypo reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).*

Stimming in the neurodivergent community are repeated behaviors people do, usually in feeling a positive or negative reaction, or as something to calm oneself down. Near exhibits this by twirling his hair. This is imaged over 72 times in the manga. He is also shown stacking various small objects a lot, such as matches and dice, many times in a very specific order. The detective is also drawn toward consistency, wearing the same outfit every day, and choosing not to leave the environments he is in, especially when preoccupied with a task unless it is necessary. Playing with toys could be accounted as a special interest for him. Since he is depicted as nineteen for the majority of the show, interacting with them could be described as "a strong attraction to unusual objects", with a "abnormal intensity and focus". An instance of this focus was in prior scene mentioned, where Near was completing his puzzle while hearing the news his mentor died early

[2] *DSM-5(R) Guidebook: The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014).

in the manga. His artifacts and games usually take up his attention instead of the people talking to him. These can also be things that assist him with focusing, as some figurines are used to

represent other characters and events in the work. The most prominent example of this is having finger puppets representing each of the suspects and detectives in the Kira case. He also seems to have certain sensory muting and seeking methods which are patterns in the manga. In terms of sensory seeking, he is usually presented with some sort of intense visual stimuli around him, such as having many flashing monitors on, usually of the same image. His constant stacking of small objects could also attribute to this and provide some sort of visual and feeling stimuli. In terms of sensory muting, he wears the same clothes every day, which seem to be loose pajama pants and a shirt along with socks, all in the tone of white. This could be to have texture consistency in the clothes. His peculiar way of sitting could also be a form of sensory seeking.
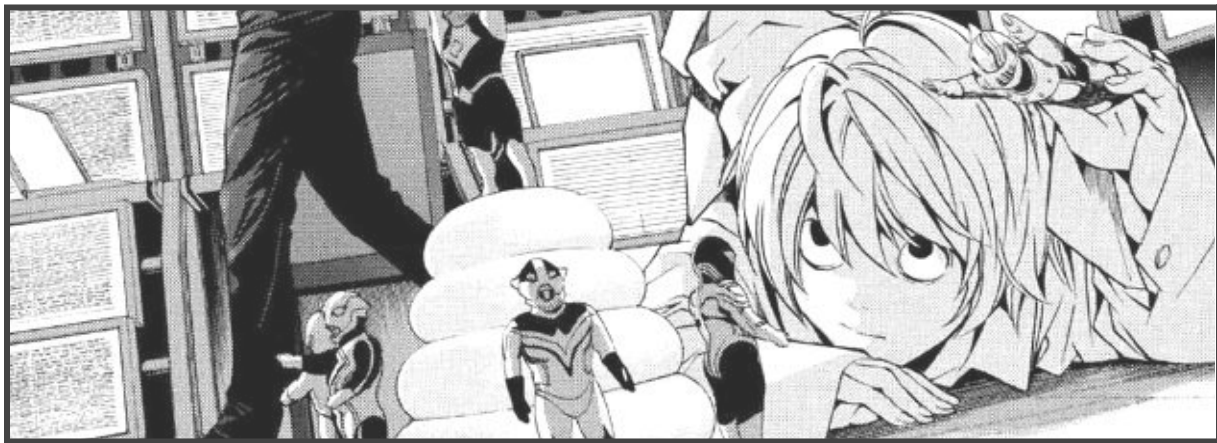
The third part of the DSM-5 in regards to an autism diagnosis is along the following:

3. [3]*Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).*

4. *Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.*
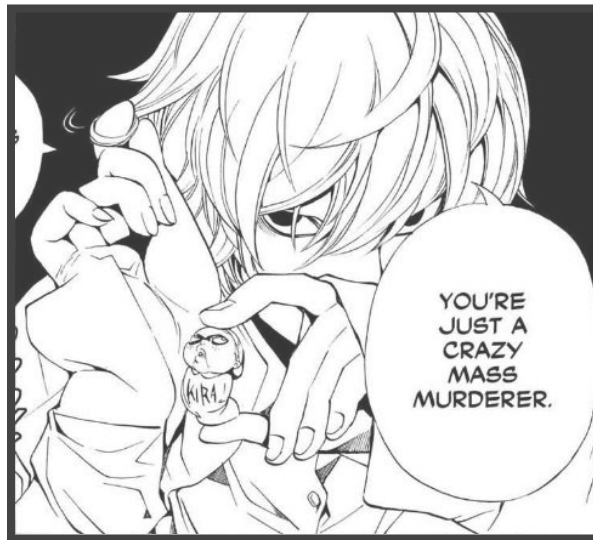
We can't exactly prove whether he experienced the same things when extremely young, but as we have seen the character develop from ages 13 to 21, his mannerisms, interests, and the various types of assistance he needs seemed to stay consistent. Near's implied autism also impairs him to function on his own. L, who is also heavily implied as neurodivergent, was able to go to college and other places in public on his own with little to no trouble. Near, on the other hand, is always monitored and is never alone in a scene. He always has people to assist him with an array of tasks that most young adults can perform on their own. The most obvious example of this is when Near calls one of his agents stationed in a different state to go assist him to the airport, as he was unable to settle all the arrangements on his own.

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[3] *DSM-5(R) Guidebook: The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014).

After all of this, Near proves himself to be an incredibly complex and diverse character. Despite the common misconception that those on the spectrum are prone to being emotionless, he proves this wrong, such as smirking when he's one step ahead of Kira. He cares deeply for his team, showing a sense of hurt when many of his team are killed, and presenting a gained determination in tracking the mass killer, almost as a way to avenge them. He attributes his successes to the help of those around him, both dead and alive. He has a unique sense of justice, that oversteps certain laws he doesn't view as right, while never compromising a life, especially the lives of those on his team. He is very mature, more so than other characters who have been in their positions of power longer, and stays consistent with his morals. He also is known for his snarkiness and subtle sense of humor, not afraid of saying what he wants to say.

After these points, some may ask why I went through all these lengths explaining why this character is autistic? Why go through all of this elaborate thinking? The reason is that I believe affirming representation is important. People in minority communities, whether that be of physicality, ethnicity, neurodivergence, or anything else, seek the acknowledgment of their existence in the media. Hoping that prior perceptions of them would fade in the past, and that the flashing screens and the pages of books would bring a generation of awareness and diversity. However, when ill-portrayed, misinformation can be extremely harmful in terms of both those being represented, and those taking in that information, imprinting impressions in their brain.

I always tried to take in autistic media, to see if I could relate to someone, even fictional, who shared the same experiences I did in an affirming way. Unfortunately, I was let down and felt isolated with each white Caucasian man to take the screens by storm, with the director in the back chanting in the back in the name of awareness. As previously mentioned, authentic representation is a better step above awareness. Almost everyone has a vague idea of what autism is, usually provided by two very specific tropes. The first of these feature a person who's incredibly smart, with a rude demeanor to strangers, perceived as a genius by everyone else around them, and is socially acceptable enough to pass as neurotypical. Prominent examples of this could be *BBC's Sherlock Holmes'* Sherlock Holmes, and *The Big Bang Theory's* Sheldon Cooper. This type of portrayal usually encourages masking and presents more stigma around those who are autistic to attempt to fit into society more with the aids they need. The other side

of this is the trope of a "savant", which is a character who usually possesses one singular, incredible skill to prove there's something special in them. They often also require full-time assistance from the allistic protagonist of the movie, are serve almost as a prop to help them become a better, more understanding individual. Popular examples of these are *What Eating Gilbert Grape's,* Arine Gripe, and *Rain Man's* Raymond Babbitt, both commonly referred to as the most popular autistic characters in film. I don't think I need to elaborate on why this is such an ill thing.

Contrary to this, good impressions can leave positive impacts on people's minds. There are usually three signs when searching for good representation in media, specifically picture and/or animated media. The first is how relatable the character is in relation to the certain person group, whether confirmed or heavily agreed upon by the fanbase. These are found in a character's actions, body language, dialogue, and any other form of them just existing in a creative work. Secondly, it is realism and the separation of stereotypes. Examples of autism stereotypes are being emotionless, having a certain look, or falling into the "savant" trope . The third thing is that the story functions and doesn't revolve around the person's representation. A story that focuses on it too hard and makes it the main purpose can easily fall into existing stereotypes. Instead, creators should highlight diversity, not as one's full personality, but as a small fragment in the beautiful creation that they are.

Accurate representations of often ignored or misunderstood groups in media showcase many essential positives for all people taking it in. Characters are the driving point of stories that set them apart from something of a similar plot. They touch the hearts of people similar and different as they rise, fall, fail and triumph as their genuine selves. They are the looking glass of how others potentially experience the world in their unique way, and amplify the ideology that every person has a contribution they can provide. Characters can open the eyes and minds of people, giving them new perceptions, ideals, and beliefs different from their prior ones. It provides a voice for those who were never given a proper one before, encouraging them to be bold and true to themselves. Specifically for those in the autistic community, they can feel the need not to mask anymore, and to express themselves freely around the people they love. To be understood, seen, valid, and unconditionally cared for.

Every time I sat down to either watch or read *Deathnote*, I found such comfort in the source material, and always felt the grip the show had on me. The storyline contains a beautifully crafted plot, (which I could write a whole article also), but truly shines with its masterfully developed characters, highlighting its neurodivergent ones rather well. Sure, Near does follow a few common conceptions of those who are autistic such as being more introverted and maintaining a high level of intelligence, but these don't bring down the originality of his character in the slightest. I knew there was a reason he was so significant to me the moment I encountered him in the series. Why he differed from the other autistic representations I have witnessed mentioned so far. It was because he was a person outside of a label of autism. No one in the series mentions his diagnosis. The text doesn't scream it in your face, yet he shows obvious signs of neurodiversity weighed in by both professional and personal accounts. His character came across as natural, authentic, and real. A character outside a closed-in label. He struggles, and the show portrays perfectly that despite his intellect, sass, and all the things he is able to do, he falls short sometimes. He has some things that are limitations to him, which people on the spectrum experience according to their own needs. He needs help with certain day-to-day situations, and this is accepted without ridicule and judgment. His habits are not seen as a quirk. His behaviors don't make him less of a person, and he proves himself to be successful with the accommodations he needs and the people who help him. He is disabled and content with it. That is why his character is so important.

REFERENCES

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