Animal Heads

Exploring Christian Themed Solutions and Mental Health Through Comics

Mariannette Oyola-Perez
Exploring Christian Themed Solutions and Mental Health Through Comics

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Todd Smith, Chair

Joshua Wilson, First Reader

Paul Reynolds, Second Reader

Todd Smith, Department Chair
Dedication

This book is dedicated to anyone who refuses to accept that there will only ever be darkness. To the light-seekers and the fighters: there is hope. You have a choice.

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Abstract

The second leading cause of death for the ages of 10-24 is suicide, a statistic that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows has steadily risen since 1999. Although it is seldom spoken about in mental health circles, an enmity seems to exist between Christianity and modern psychology in regards to mental illness and how it should be treated; this enmity could be preventing helpful Christian-based principles from being shared with the at-risk population while simultaneously excluding Christians from a conversation they need to be a part of.

Interestingly, further research shows that the at-risk demographic overlaps significantly with those most likely to buy or read comic books: people ages 13 to 24. If there is an overlap between comic readers and the at-risk population and if there could be useful information to be shared from Christian teachings with those populations, then perhaps exploring Christian-themed solutions to mental illness through comic books might be of benefit to both communities.
The second leading cause of death for people ages 10-24 in the United States is suicide, and although it is rarely spoken of in mental health circles, an enmity seems to exist between Christianity and modern psychology regarding what should be done about this. This enmity could be preventing helpful Christian-based principles from being shared with the at-risk population, which, interestingly enough, significantly overlaps with those most likely to buy or read comic books: people ages 13 to 24. Further investigation proposes that one of the reasons for such an increase might come from yet another rise in reported cases of mental illness and emotional struggles, of which diagnoses of depression and anxiety are the most prevalent. Without the proper treatment or therapy for those affected and without creating awareness amongst those who are not affected, the 24% to 36% percent of at-risk Americans is only expected to grow.

Since suicide is only one of the possible repercussions of pushing this topic aside and since the at-risk population literally holds America’s future in its hands, solutions have been presented in the areas of psychology, psychiatry, counseling, and therapy. However, Christian philosophies, practices, and psychotherapies are often left unexplored, especially by mainstream psychologists and therapists. Although it is seldom spoken of in mental health circles, there seems to be enmity between Christianity and modern psychology, especially regarding mental illness and how it should be treated.

Research shows that although there are many reason for this enmity, the following reasons are the most prevalent: (1) the Church has historically viewed mental illnesses as nothing but spiritual in nature and has often rejected psychology and psychotherapy as viable options for believers; (2) many secular psychologists believe that Christianity is nothing but a religious practice and thus has nothing of value to offer in the area of psychology; (3) many Christian teachings are derided as “hate speech,” creating an antagonism between the secular and the church in general. Because of these reasons, Biblical practices that might aid in the treatment of mental illness and emotional struggle will remain almost exclusively Christian practices and be left mostly unexplored by a secular demographic, which is as much a potential disservice to those trying to help as to the ones needing help.

Coincidentally, further research shows that the at-risk demographic has an interesting overlap with those who are most likely to buy
or read comic books: people ages 13 to 24. The juxtaposition of words and pictures is not a modern idea; from as early as Egyptian art, art historians were able to recognize the effectiveness of the combination of language and image for recordkeeping and communication. This combination has continued to develop throughout different historical events, often being used for social commentary and political satire. This was the case with Ben Franklin who, in 1754, created one of the first documented American Political art pieces, “Join or Die,” as part of his newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette. Places like Paris and Britain also continued using image, language, and satire, often launching magazines dedicated to their showcase as was the case with Punch and Vanity Fair, published between 1840 and 1870. Meanwhile in America, the first newspaper comic strip, “The Yellow Kid,” was published in 1896 by Richard Felton Outcault, which opened the door for other comic strips.

As a continuation of comics’ progression, comic book agencies soon began to form, such as DC Comics in 1934, followed by Marvel Comics in 1947. Although some comics’ narratives were more fantastical in nature, they still represented their time, as was the case with Captain America who was meant to serve as a morale booster during World War II.

With the introduction of online platforms, online comics, or webcomics, started to emerge. Although it is debated, some experts agree that the 1980’s “Witches in Stitches” by Eric Monster Millikin was the first webcomic; it was even distributed through CompuServe, the first major commercial online service provider in the United States. Such is the popularity of comic books and webcomics that they have become pop culture icons, often launching magazines dedicated to their showcase as was the case with Punch and Vanity Fair, published between 1840 and 1870. Meanwhile in America, the first newspaper comic strip, “The Yellow Kid,” was published in 1896 by Richard Felton Outcault, which opened the door for other comic strips.

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Towry, Barry Alfonso, Bob Sourk, and Greg Bear and currently attracts more than 200,000 attendees to each of their locations every year.

If comic books and webcomics are such an important and effective method of communication, especially when considering young audiences, perhaps they can be used to bring awareness to mental illness, suicide, and Christian principles as viable solutions. Even if Christian teachings and practices aren’t accepted by all, theoretically, if just a portion of the at-risk population was reached, it could help them cope with mental illnesses and thus potentially help decrease suicide rates.

The purpose of this study is to synthesize topics of interest in a sort of “how to” for Christian artists who are passionate about reaching targeted demographics through comics and illustration and who wish to present them with viable solutions to cope with mental illness while encouraging an alliance between Christian teachings and modern psychology. Merely glancing at the internet, television, or pop culture would be more than enough to understand that mental illness and its effect on our culture are no myth. Just one death by suicide is enough to shake the general public into awareness and action to prevent the next one, and this should be more than enough to wake up the church as well.
Chapter 2
Research

I. Introduction
There has been an increase in suicide rates in America since the 1990s (Scutti). These cases are heavily associated with various mental illnesses, especially depression and anxiety (Mental Health). For youth from the ages of 10 to 14, the second leading cause of death is suicide (Mental Health). Coincidentally, the age group that is most likely to purchase comic books is 13 to 19-year-olds (Alberson). There is a significant overlap between the at-risk population and the demographic most likely to buy a comic book, and although the topic of mental illness has been addressed through comic books before, there has been very little information on how a Christian worldview might be presented through the same medium, especially since, historically, there has been an antagonistic relationship between Christianity and psychology (Thompson).

Furthermore, because of dogmatic approaches implemented by Christians in the past, a Christian message is more likely to be dismissed as “hate speech” by many (Britt). Despite this double-disconnect between Christianity and psychology and Christianity and the secular world, Christian counseling continues to develop and produce results, proving itself a viable option for psychotherapy, and through the vehicle of comic books, effective storytelling, and narrative, Christian psychotherapeutic theories and practices could be better communicated to the at-risk population while sidestepping preconceived dogmatism and hate-speech notions.

II. Correlation between Mental Illnesses and Suicide Rates
As mentioned before, America has experienced an increase in suicide rates since the 1990s, with suicide becoming the second leading cause of death for young people aged 10 to 14, and 13.1% of those suicides are youth from 15 to 24 years old (Mental Health). Statistics show that mental disorders often work as a form of trigger for these suicidal tendencies, and 70% of all Americans are diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime; of these, depression and anxiety have the strongest connection to suicide (Depression and Suicide Risk).

Experts have studied that becoming acquainted with the “essence” of the mental illness is the key to treatment, and thus, as the
study of the “essence” continues to expand, so too do the efforts to treat and work with mental illnesses continue to be explored in order to provide better living standards and prevent suicide (Blumenthal).

III. The Different Types of Mental Illnesses

Although understanding the human mind has proven to be a very difficult task, psychologists have been able to identify different types of mental illnesses, and this differentiation helps professionals and individuals understand the nature of a mental pattern and discover how best to treat it. These categories include Anxiety Disorders, Mood Disorders, Psychotic Disorders, Eating Disorders, Impulse Control and Addiction Disorders, Personality Disorders, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders, Stress Response Syndromes (Adjustment Disorders), Dissociative Disorders, Factitious Disorders, Sexual and Gender Disorders, Somatic Symptom Disorders, and Tic Disorders. For the purposes of this research, I will only be focusing on defining Anxiety Disorders, Mood Disorders, Psychotic Disorders, Personality Disorders, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders as per the DSM Library.

In order to understand how Anxiety Disorders work, it is important to understand the difference between anxiety and fear. As per the DSM, “fear is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas anxiety is anticipation of future threat” (DSM Library). Anxiety can manifest itself in several different forms, including Separation Anxiety Disorders, Selective Mutism, or Specific Phobia. In all these cases, there is a stress inducer that causes an anxiety response. For instance, in the case of Separation Anxiety Disorder, “the individual ... is fearful or anxious about separation from attachment figures to a degree that is developmentally inappropriate” (DSM Library). In the case of Selective Mutism, although the individual may speak regularly, in situations in which they are expected to talk, they fail to speak, which affects their normal social communication. In the case of people with specific phobias, individuals are fearful and anxious about specific objects or situations such as animals, natural environments, or blood-injection-injury. For it to be considered a specific phobia, however, the individual’s fear of the object must be “out of proportion to the actual risk posed” (DSM Library).

Mood Disorders are characterized by “persistent feelings of sadness or periods of feeling overly happy, or fluctuations from extreme happiness to extreme sadness” (Golberg, 2016). Perhaps the two most commonly mentioned disorders within this category are depression and bipolar disorders. Depressive Disorders “include disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, major depressive disorder (including major depressive episode), persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia), premenstrual dysphoric disorder, substance/medication-induced depressive disorder, depressive disorder due to another medical condition, other specified depressive disorder, and unspecified depressive disorder” (DSM Library).

That is to say, the patient often feels the “presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual’s capacity to function.” In contrast, Bipolar Disorders, which mainly include bipolar I disorder, bipolar II disorder, and cyclothymic disorder, are characterized by extreme mood swings between mania and depression in the case of Bipolar I disorder. Patients experiencing Bipolar II disorder have hypomanic and depressive episodes, and although cyclothymic patients have fewer swings between poles, it still interferes with their lives in destructive ways.

Psychotic Disorders are characterized by distortions within methods of thinking or general awareness. Within this disorder, two of the most common symptoms are hallucinations, usually in the form of sounds and visions, or delusions, which are beliefs accepted as truth despite being proven untrue (Golberg, 2016). Schizophrenia is the most widely heard of the Psychotic Disorders. Within the Schizophrenia Spectrum, patients experience “delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking or speech, grossly disorganized or abnormal motor behavior such as catatonia, and negative symptoms (DSM Library).

Although there is a large range of Personality Disorders, they are mostly recognizable as “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment” (DSM Library). Popular Personality Disorders include Paranoid Personality Disorder or “a pattern of distrust and suspiciousness such that others’ motives are interpreted as malevolent,” Antisocial Personality Disorder or “a pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others,” and Borderline Personality Disorder which is characterized by “a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity” (DSM Library).

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is characterized “by the presence of obsessions and/or compulsions.” In this case, the word “obsession” is defined as “recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted,” while “compulsion” is defined as “repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly” (DSM Library). These
obsessive compulsions range in manifestation from repetitive thoughts to physical acts like counting obsessively or even picking one’s skin or pulling one’s own hair.

IV. Relationship between Mental Illnesses and Christianity

A. Christian Historical View of Mental Illnesses

Historically, the connection between Christianity and psychology has been poor, especially regarding mental illness. Studies show that within Christian circles, to look for outside professional help when dealing with mental illness is seen as controversial at best and heretical at worst; those who seek therapy are often considered to be turning their backs on God or to the notion that a higher power can help them with their struggles (Thompson).

Because of Christianity’s general belief that mental illnesses are to be dealt with spiritually, they seek to remedy mental illnesses and struggles through spiritual support, which leaves little room for those within the congregation who wish to seek professional help. Since studies show that social support within preferred social groups is fundamental to treating those who suffer from mental illness.

Thus, recovery from mental illness within religious spheres is far less likely (Wesselmann). This, however, does not reflect how Christian congregations view and treat those outside of the church who struggle with mental illness. Studies show that in comparison to the general population, Christians tend to be more accepting of those who struggle with mental illness (Gray).

B. Christian Psychotherapy

This disconnect between Christianity and psychology has been noted by many Christian psychologists and counselors, and they have sought to develop Christian thought in the field of psychology. The basic goal behind the expansion is to seek to become a part of the field with a Christian worldview as the main motivation. This development seeks to explore mental illness not only through the clinical scope, but also through that of neuroplasticity and psychiatry as viable solutions (Clinton).

C. Biblical Counseling

Another school of thought that has recently regained popularity amidst Christian circles is Biblical Counseling. It is important to note that those who seek to practice this sort of counseling understand there to be a marked difference between Biblical Counseling and Christian Psychology.

According to Heath Lambert, author of A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministries, “counseling is a theological discipline.” Thus, Lambert directly challenges the assumption that human behavior is the realm of psychology by establishing the efficiency of “what the Bible teaches today about any given topic,” which includes therapy and counseling. In his book, he is able to overlap theology’s nature with that of counseling and makes a case that they are not mutually exclusive, and thus, theology plays the most important role in distinction between Christian and secular counselors.

In the video, Psychology and the Christian, Pastor Brad Bigney speaks more to this subject when he explains two different modern psychology models (Freud’s and P.F. Skinner’s) and their roots. In both cases, there are core characteristics that do not agree with biblical principles and thus, cannot be “Christianized.”

For instance, Freud thinks of man as animal, when the Bible speaks about intelligent design (Genesis 1:27). Freud also believed that the solution to man’s struggle was to get rid of the guilt produced by the superego (morality), but the bible speaks about “the desires of the flesh” versus “the desires of the spirit,” and how one is to follow one and reject the other (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Because the desires of the Spirit are synonymous to morality in a Christian sense, Freud’s model goes against Christian teachings. Those who prefer to use Biblical Counseling as their preferred method of therapy and counseling are wary of using modern psychology references in their practice because their core philosophy and biblical theology might not align at all. In essence, between psychology and theology, they will always choose straight theology as the base of their counseling and therapy.

V. Why Christians Fail to Infiltrate the “Secular” World and Solution

A. Enemy or Ally: Relationship between Christianity and Psychology

The way faith and science relate to one another has been a great source of debate for many years. Some experts would argue that the way either field interprets the natural world is through radically different worldviews that begin with different assumptions and thus reach different conclusions. In a historical sense, the way faith and science have addressed the topic of human nature is regarded as opposites, one based upon religion and the other upon logic and observation. From as early as Nicolas Copernicus and Galileo’s time, conflicts between reason and religion have arisen. Galileo, upon pointing out that his discoveries about the natural world went against the beliefs held by the Roman Catholic church at the time, had to withstand trials and judgment. Concerning the whole ordeal, Dr. David Entwistle writes that “the seeds of later conflict were later sown by placing theology above all other modes of intellectual pursuit, with little recognition of the human capacity to err in putting theology together” (2010, p. 3).

This view of man’s interpretation of theology over discovery wasn’t held by all the Christian faith, however. For instance, it is said that Martin Luther stipulated that “science and faith deal with the same reality, albeit in different ways and following
different agendas - description, analysis, and explanation on the side of science; reassurance, trust, and responsibility on the side of faith” (Nurnberger, 2010, p. 154). Still, an enmity between theology and science had already been established, and it was one that would not be so easily shaken off. The fields of psychology and Christianity are no exception to this.

With the emergence of Christian counseling and therapy came the increased exploration of the historical relationship between Christianity and Psychology. This emergence occurred with one main question in mind: can Christianity and Psychology truly work together towards a common goal, or should they remain mutually exclusive? In order to understand the relationship between the two disciplines, experts thought about different descriptive models that help define the different viewpoints each holds on various issues. The collective goal was to narrow down each discipline’s best practices so that emotional and psychological issues could be better addressed. Dr. Entwistle defines these models as follows: the Enemies Model, the Spies Model, the Colonialist Model, the Neutral Parties Model, and the Allies Model. This research chapter will focus mostly on the Enemies Model and the Allies Model.

Dr. Entwistle defines the Enemies Model as “an either/or position on the psychology of human beings versus the theology of human beings” (Entwistle, 2010, p. 177). For those who hold to this view, there can only be either science or religion, not both. Those who favor this model pay close attention to the fact that since theology uses Scripture as its base while psychology uses nature as its base, there can be no correlation between one and the other, and only one can be correct. Concerning this division, John D. Carter states that this enmity isn’t one-sided; in his article titled “Sacred and Secular Models of Psychology and Religion,” he states that this model is “Christianity against Psychology, and Psychology against Christianity” (1981, p. 84).

In this model, not only is there mutual exclusivity between the two camps, there is hostility between them as well. Entwistle calls those loyal to reason, Secular Combatants, and those loyal to Christianity, Christian Combatants; where Secular Combatants are skeptics regarding religious ritualistic practices, Christian Combatants constantly guard against human reason and secular academia as sources of truth, much like the Roman Catholic church did with Galileo. Carter continues to say that the “Religion against psychology” model rejects any ideas regarding the human nature that is beyond the scope of the Scriptures and is highly suspicious of psychological theories and practices” (Carter, 1981, p. 87). Conversely, the “psychology against religion” side sees religion as “the creator of needless, personal emotional pain due to its oppression and imposition of guilt.” To Secular Combatants, “religion is... allowable for children and for primitive people who are not sophisticated enough to recognize its limiting function.” (Carter, 1981, p. 84).

In contrast, there are those who favor the Allies Model, which “recognizes the underlying unity of human nature and the legitimacy of both theological and psychological investigation ... and that all truth is known by God, who is sovereign over all things” (Entwistle, 2010, p. 147). In this model, psychology’s importance is acknowledged under God’s sovereignty. Instead of thinking of psychology as something that is inherently going to be against scriptural truth, those who hold this view try to understand psychology through a biblical worldview, recognizing truths that resonate with Biblical principles.

“Although theology and psychology are separate with their own sources, methodologies, and findings, they both express truth about human nature and functioning” (Entwistle, 2010, p. 170). Carter writes that this model finds “expected congruence between Scripture and psychology because God has revealed himself in a special way in Scripture and in a general way in creation and also via his image in man” (Carter, 1981, 89). Other scholars have understood this model to seek to explain “what the domains of psychology and theology have in common.” How these disciplines interpret human nature, human development, what is “wrong,” and how to overcome that which is “wrong” (Johnson and Jones 2000, p.39). In other words, the Allies Model serves as a way to find similarities between camps which have otherwise been thought of as enemies.

For those seeking to practice psychology from a Christian perspective, the rejection of the Enemies Model, as well as the integration of the Allies Model, has assisted tremendously. Institutions such as Liberty University, for instance, have sought to include a Psychology degree as part of their curriculum to provide a Christian platform from which to practice Psychology. Bachelor of Science Student, Josh Welch states that part of the reason why he chose to study Psychology at Liberty University was because of the Christian background it provided. Welch states that “in a field dominated by new ideals, different theories, and principles rising up, it is good to have a foundation set in Christianity and have that faith-based background so that you can take those secular principles and apply them in a Christian context” (Liberty University, 2018).

B. Original vs. Modern definition of “Hate Speech”

“Hate speech has been defined as ‘words that wound’” (Britt). Unfortunately to some, especially when looked at through a secular mindset, biblical teachings are “words that wound” to some. For example, the fact that Leviticus 18:22 says, “do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman,” because “that is detestable,” is blatant hate speech to some homosexuals.

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Thus, because the Christian’s core belief is based upon moral values that some consider hate speech, many are often outraged.

The presence of hate speech, however, is not a new subject of interest. Some scholars say that the beginning of hate speech regulation started after World War II. After the heinous actions of the Third Reich, many learned to identify anti-Semitic and racist language immediately. For instance, John Paul II famously stated that a culture of peace is built by “rejecting at the outset every sort of racism and intolerance” (Auxier). I propose, however, that in the modern day, this notion of “rejection” has been stretched to extend past “racism and intolerance” in the contest for which it was meant and into the idea that any form of rejection should automatically be associated with hate speech. Herein lies the problem: “If tolerance is defined, as it often is, based upon moral values that some consider hate speech, many are often outraged.” (Von Bergen).

C. S. Lewis’ “Experience”
When Christians seek to communicate with others and share a message relating to their religious worldview, they might be faced with problems like mindless dogmatism of their own making, prejudice, and rejection because their message could be perceived as hate speech. C.S. Lewis, however, was able to communicate to Christians and secular people alike through his work. Lewis believed that what connected man to Christ was a certain “experience” which he described as an “intense longing, an ‘unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction’” (Starr). It is said, then, that it was Lewis’ belief that through his work, he merely provided a window of joy’s fulfillment, in which man’s intense longing and unsatisfied desire was momentarily fulfilled, leaving them wondering how to receive more. The goal was to make an experience for the viewer in which they had no other choice but to look, listen, and receive (Starr).

The way Lewis achieved this was through understanding that being a Christian didn’t mean that he had to choose Reason over Imagination, or vice versa. On the contrary, his faith was best manifested through their marriage, which brings readers time and time again to the heart of both his Christian belief and his literary practice (Guite). Perhaps the fact that C.S. Lewis didn’t seek to preach dogmatically, but to merely show a glimpse of that which he knew was real joy through Reason and Imagination, is what made his message so effective.

VI. Social Importance of Storytelling, Narrative, Art, and Graphic Novels

A. The Importance of Storytelling
It can be observed throughout history that storytelling is a strong cultural component for most, if not all civilizations. Originally only passed down through word of mouth, storytelling evolved through the development of language, and then again, through the development of art and art mediums. Through storytelling, elements such as worldview, ideational systems, and belief systems are communicated, and through said communication, community interaction is both established and widened (Braid). One such way in which storytelling has modernly prevailed is through the medium of the comic book. Because comic books are considered a “multimodal medium” that combines images and words in one visual package (Kukkonen), its effectiveness in terms of education, storytelling, and narrative are indisputable. In education programs, because of its pop-cultural relevance, comic books act as a sort of helpful mediator between educator and student (Glushinz). Some educators say that through comic books, one can follow a sort of American historical narrative that would otherwise be lost (Karp). Ergo, the legitimacy of the comic book as a powerful cultural tool is legitimized through its storytelling legacy and narrative base.

B. How to Write a Good Story/Narrative
Because of the historical importance of storytelling and narrative, many professionals have sought to understand what the components of a good story are. Joseph Campbell was one of these professionals, and is, arguably, one who stands out amongst them as someone who gathered the most helpful information on the topic. In his studies, he focused on “myth” as the repeating human story. Furthermore, he made an interesting connection between man’s myths and the way that we as humans relate to God by saying both that “the source of myths is the human psyche” and that “myths are the masks of God”. Because of his interest in the human psyche, Campbell sought to understand it through different psychological studies like Carl Jung’s theories. Campbell automatically understood the intrinsic connection between psychology and storytelling.

Perhaps one of the most well-known ways in which Campbell was able to explore myth was through the study of the repeating patterns in hero’s tales throughout history. Through his extensive research, he was able to find a large number of recurring themes, including character archetypes, similar obstacles and conflicts, and struggles that need to be overcome by the hero to complete the story. Campbell explains that even when someone’s myth isn’t expressed, that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist, and that furthermore, there is such a thing as a “true myth,” as exemplified by its testing through a human being’s life (Campbell). Thus, according to Campbell, the
key to making a good story is to make sure that the hero of the story goes through all the elements which have historically resulted in a satisfactory hero’s journey.

VII. Communication Theories

A. Advertisement
Part of understanding the most effective method of communication is to understand what has worked in the past. Like Joseph Campbell did in order to understand what makes a good story, marketing strategists Chip and Dan Heath wrote a book about how to “make ideas stick.” In the book, they discuss many tactics they have compiled from a series of studies they have conducted and from other professionals in the field. Ultimately, they express that for an idea to “stick,” it has to be “interesting but not sensational, truthful but not mind-blowing, important but not ‘life-or-death.’”

B. Color
Studies show that color plays an important role in people’s decisions of whether they like something or not (Singh). This can be observed most powerfully through the natural world, where different colors are known to work as signifiers ranging from reproduction to self-defense (Eckstut). Ergo, the effective use of color through an intelligent awareness of color psychology and color theory is quintessential in areas such as psychology, health, culture, and emotion (Singh).

C. Cinematographic Techniques: Shots
According to Timothy Heiderich of Videomaker, the “camera is a surrogate for [the] audience. The way it interacts with the scene dictates the way [the] audience feels they are interacting with the scene.” Thus, how a camera is positioned and how it captures an image is an active part of good storytelling and mood-setting. Although there are many types of shots, the ones this thesis will focus on for creative purposes are as follows:

Extreme Long Shot:
“Show subjects of relatively massive scale” (Heiderich). That is to say, the Extreme Long Shot shows scale comparisons so that the audience can get a better idea of the monumentality. Normally, this sort of shot displays large elements like mountains or rivers.

Long Shot:
“The distance of the camera from its subject also reflects an emotional distance; the audience doesn’t get as emotionally involved in what’s going on as they would if they were closer. In this sort of shot, the viewer is a casual bystander, and is there to explore the setting. General details are available, but nothing specific can be gathered due to the distance between the viewer and the scene’s elements.

Medium Long Shot:
“Fall[s] between the long and close shots, this is more informative than emotional.” This shot expresses emotional neutrality because it is too close to be considered informative, and too far to be an intimate shot. Still, it reveals more information about the subject than the Long Shot.

Medium Shot:
“Where [the audience is] starting to engage with the characters on a personal level.” In this shot, the camera (or audience) is standing as close to the subject as someone would during a normal conversation, which allows for the viewer to establish an emotional connection with the subject.

Close-Up:
“More intimate than the medium shot, the expressions and emotions of an actor are more visible and affecting and is meant to engage the character in a direct and personal manner.” Since this shot is closer than normal conversation, it tells the viewer that the scene has more to do with the character’s reaction to his or her surroundings. The viewer notices more personal details that otherwise might have been lost in normal a conversation.

Extreme Close-Up:
“For amplifying emotional intensity, the extreme close-up puts the camera right in the actor’s face, making even their smallest emotional cues huge — and raises the intensity of the problems behind them.” From the viewer’s perspective, this sort of shot demands attention and observation made easier due the extreme proximity.

Dutch Angle:
“Tilting the camera gives a subtle cue that something about the scene is unstable or just a little bit off-kilter.” The Dutch Angle effectively shows disequilibrium within the subject’s mentality or surroundings.

Bird’s Eye Shot:
“Similar to the extreme long shot, this starts to get into the abstract realm of shapes and lines.” In this shot, the viewer isn’t engaged with a character, which allows them a moment of emotional rest (Heiderich).

VIII. Historical Review of how Worldview affects Art
Although each artist is responsible for learning theory and techniques, it has been historically proven that personal philosophies and worldview affect theory application and, thus, the result an artist produces. For instance, the Dada movement originated in the 19th century between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. Although the movement’s style is very easily recognized in terms of aesthetics and artistic practices, one of the most important aspects of the art movement is why it was being created. For some scholars, Dada was either a nihilistic manifestation or was deeply rooted in Taoism or Zen Buddhism.
In this case, neither “Nihilism,” “Taoism,” nor “Buddhism,” are art theory or technique. These terms are worldviews or life philosophies which informed and influenced the artist’s creative process and the ultimate visual result. Similarly, Romanticism is a sort of rebellion against the Neo-Classical movement (Neoclassicism Curriculum Education at the Getty). Both movements were rooted in different philosophies and worldviews; Neo-Classicism is characterized by a pull back towards logic and Greek Classicism, while Romanticism sought to reject the notion of logic as man’s leading worldview and embrace a different life philosophy (Grugan). Some scholars believe that “philosophy finds in art its true expressive capacity as a transcendental practice” (Kodowick). Thus, because every human being has a dominating philosophy or worldview, it could be argued that how art theories and practices are implemented will be affected by the artist’s philosophy or worldview.

**IX. Comics and Graphic Novels that deal with Mental Illnesses**

**A. Hyperbole and a Half**
Allie Brosh’s Hyperbole and a Half is a combination between a written blog and a web comic that depicts Brosh’s thoughts, struggles with depression and anxiety, humor, and wit. In her incredibly honest book, Brosh allows the viewer into her mind by writing exactly what she is feeling, no matter how absurd it might be. Next to her writing, however, she presents poorly drawn images as representation of what she was feeling. They are not mere illustrations of the text, however; they assist the viewer in attaining a more complete experience of what Brosh is trying to convey. Because communicating what happens to one while experiencing mental illnesses and emotional struggles is very difficult, Brosh’s ability to combine her text with words is very helpful, as the combination allows the viewer to see beyond black and white and into a more personal account of her struggles.

**B. Mom’s Cancer**
Although Brian Fies’ graphic novel Mom’s Cancer is not specifically about mental illness, it deals very closely with words and images juxtaposed to communicate the physical and emotional struggles one goes through when a loved one suffers from a serious sickness. In it, Fies provides a very detailed account of the processes a Cancer patient goes through, but instead of giving it through the Cancer patient’s perspective, he focuses on the daughter as the point of view character. Critics praise Mom’s Cancer for the fact that it simultaneously tells a physical story as well as an “emotional truth” (O’Brien.) Themes of depression, anxiety, pain, despair, and hope are explored through a graphic novel most would be too wounded to attempt to illustrate or write.

**C. Graphic Medicine**
In order to complete Mom’s Cancer, Brian Fies worked with other physicians, nurses, academics, caregivers, writers, artists and cartoonists who call themselves International Graphic Medicine. International Graphic Medicine develops “interesting ways of using comics in healthcare to deliver information, tell stories (from both the patients’ and healthcare providers’ perspectives), and teach medical humanities to future doctors and nurses” (Fries). Their work expands from Manga to Web Comics, and they hold conferences every year and have been the recipients of many awards.
Case Study: Maniac

Image removed for copyright
X. Case Study: Maniac

The theme of loneliness versus connection has been extremely important for many, especially within the fields of psychology and philosophy. Ironically, although the topic of loneliness is something that affects all of mankind, it is seldom spoken of openly. “For many people, the experience of loneliness is endured and coped with on a private level. It is rare that individuals have the chance to talk about and share what they feel when lonely” (Garrett). The Netflix series Maniac establishes this idea from the start with the lines, “hypothesis: all souls are in a quest to connect. Corollary: our minds have no awareness of this quest” (Maniac, 2018).

Through the narrative of a retro-futuristic society in which mankind’s ability to connect has been severely hindered and mental illnesses are notably prevalent, Maniac demonstrates the importance of relationship as a means to satisfy the intrinsically basic human need of connection and as a possible coping mechanism for those who struggle with mental illness.

Maniac is a 10-episode Netflix miniseries created and written by Patrick Somerville and directed by Cary Joji. The two primary characters are Owen Milgram, an individual diagnosed with Paranoid Schizophrenia who is the black sheep of his rich and wealthy family, and Annie Landsberg, a woman diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder after having lost her sister in a traumatic car accident. After Owen loses his deadbeat job and after Annie runs out of a powerful hallucinogenic drug to which she had become addicted, both characters find themselves volunteering to be a part of an experimental pharmaceutical trial through which Dr. James Mantleray, a disturbed paraphiliac with mother issues, is trying to eradicate the need for talk therapy for mental struggles. In order to do this, Mantleray creates a sentient supercomputer called GRTA, which they affectionately call Gertie, to analyze the data that subjects would produce after ingesting three pills which would identify (A), map (B), and confront (C) the individual’s problems.

While Owen’s motivations to make contact with Annie were based upon one of his schizophrenic delusions, a character named Grimson informs Owen of his mission to save the world and tells him that Annie would now be his handler; Annie, however, is still in the trial stage because the A pill—the first pill needed to complete the trial—was what she had become addicted to. As the plot continues, it becomes apparent through a series of strange behaviors that Gertie is going through a grieving period after having fallen in love with one of her developmental scientists who had recently passed away. Her grieving, however, would cause a series of abnormalities which affected the trial subjects, especially Annie and Owen.

Owen and Annie’s journey through recovery is shown through a series of dreamlike, drug induced “trips.” Somehow, Annie and Owen’s subconscious keep connecting as a possible biproduct of Gertie’s broken heart. This connection allows them to be able to go through the pill stages together, allowing...
them to provide moral support for one another and explore how their relationship dynamic was affected by their conditions and preconceived life notions. For instance, one of Annie’s strongest struggles was the fear of being like her manipulative mother, who would “wait until [her] defenses were down, and then she’d gut [her],” as per Annie’s description. Thus, Annie often came across as calloused and harsh, surface level defense mechanisms which were challenged throughout Gertie’s scenarios and Owen’s companionship.

Throughout the series, Annie identifies the source of her struggles as having been extremely unpleasant to her sister, Ellie, after Ellie had announced that she would be moving away. Since Ellie had been an important source of strong emotional support for Annie throughout the turmoil her mother had put her through, Annie began to act out, a progression that climaxed at a vacation the sisters took where Annie and Ellie were part of a fatal accident which left Ellie dead and Annie even more traumatized than before. Since then, Annie not only carried around the fear of being like her mother had been with her but also the guilt of having been so unfair to Ellie without the possibility of mending the relationship.

In the “confrontation” portion of her trial, Annie was able to see her sister and “let her go,” consciously choosing to let the guilt go and live in a world where Ellie would never exist. Being able to make this decision meant that she wouldn’t be stuck in Gertie’s dreamlike world after having struck a deal to stay only if it meant being with Ellie, allowing Annie to continue her life as “healthy Annie.”

Owen’s resolution was far more literal than it first appeared. Unlike Annie, whose resolution came within the confrontation phase of the trial, Owen’s Grimson hallucinations in told him he would be the savior of the world, which resulted in being the key to coerce Gertie to let her subjects go after she had an emotional breakdown because of her grieving period. This gave some validity to Owen’s “hallucinations,” which ended up becoming more real to him than others in his world would know.

Furthermore, being able to experience the trial allowed him to understand the constant pressure his family had put him under through such things as asking him to lie in court about his rapist brother. His father addressed this request as an “honor,” in which Owen got to protect the Milgram men from opportunistic women who just wanted a way “in” with their family. Once the pharmaceutical trial concluded, Owen was able to truthfully testify against his brother in court, expressing that “he wasn’t a liar, and that he was sorry.” For this, his family retaliated by sending him to a mental institution because of mental stability.

Spending time with Annie helped him realize that he was in need of true connections as opposed to the fake fantasies he had about running away with someone and starting anew. Thus, when Annie, having putting into practice her newly found emotional resolutions, was able to reach out to Owen and express her desire to have a constant relationship with him, and she came to break him out of the mental institute. Owen was able to overcome his fears and leave with her, effectively starting their recovery from trauma and establishing real connections.

Maniac’s thesis, so to speak, revolves around the negative effects of loneliness on the human psyche and the need for true connection with others as a means to cope with how warped our minds can become. When trying to break him out of the mental institution, Owen first tries to resist Annie by saying, “I’m crazy,” to which Annie responds, “maybe you’re diagnosed. Maybe you need to be medicated, but this does not work for me. I don’t think it works for you either. So you saw some things that weren’t there. So, what?” Owen retaliates by speaking aloud why it wouldn’t make sense to leave with her, reminding her that he’s tried to do the normal thing before only to be confronted with a broken heart. “It’s just easier if you’re not real,” he says. “But I am real. You know me. You’re braver than this, Owen. And I will never do that to you.”

This is the sort of conversation that should be encouraged in general, but especially with those who suffer from mental illnesses which have otherwise hindered their abilities to relate and have healthy connections.
XI. Conclusion

The increasing prevalence of suicide in American youth is concerning, especially in those aged 10 to 14. This increase is heavily associated with mental illness, especially depression and anxiety. Although Christian psychotherapy is being developed, there is a strong traditional enmity between Christian principles and Psychology. This enmity was mainly sparked from the moment the Roman Catholic church decided to place man’s interpretation of theological principles over reason. Those who adhere to this Enmity Model and are Christian Contenders believe that everything that does not comply with theology should not be taken into consideration. Furthermore, they usually believe that mental illnesses are spiritual matters and that those who seek professional help are regarded as “self-helping” individuals who don’t trust in a higher power’s ability to heal. This internal belief, however, seldom affects how Christians view secular people who struggle with mental illnesses. On the other hand, Secular Contenders believe that theology merely produces guilt through legalism and that religion is only acceptable as a primitive coping mechanism.

There is, however, a model that reconciles Christian principles and Psychology, taking the latter into account through a Christian perspective. This model, called the Allies Model, seeks to mend the gap between both camps for the common good of those affected by mental illness. Currently, one of the most popular ways of reaching the at-risk population is through comic books. The importance of storytelling and narrative has been very prominent throughout history, and Joseph Campbell is famous for documenting exactly what makes a story good. Additionally, there are advertisement theories, color theories, and cinematographic techniques which comic book artists can implement in their creation processes to help their success rates increase.

It can be shown historically that personal philosophies and worldviews affect the artist’s creative process beyond theories and practices, but for the Christian artist, the challenge of communication is to overcome elements such as the Enmity Model, external prejudice, and the hate speech radars. Luckily, there have been successful Christian artists in the past, such as C.S. Lewis, who have been able to focus on “experience” through the combination of logic and imagination in order to effectively communicate Christian principles and worldviews without being rejected. Thus, through the careful study of the presented material, a Christian comic book artist could be able to reach the at-risk demographic and present Christian-themed solutions to their struggles with mental illnesses.
Chapter 3
Visual Process

Story-Building: Reasons and Explanations

Bridging the Gap between Biblical Counseling and Mental Health through Comics

Every time I am asked to speak about what Animal Heads is about, I have to stop and think for a second. There are three main themes that this thesis deals with: biblical counseling, mental health, and comics. I have come to look at the three as the triadic heart of this production. If one is less developed than the other two, the whole thing would fall apart. That begs the question: what is Animal Heads all about? Put simply, it is to infiltrate pop culture with a biblical message in order to equip young people to better deal with mental struggles. Thus, the research portion of this thesis, where I was able to explore biblical counseling, mental health, and other important theories, informs artistic content.

Origins

Just a Bunch of Emojis

In most cases, when it came to my creative process, I would do research and then start creating my characters based upon said research. The characters were designed with a specific goal in mind: to exemplify my findings. Animal Heads’ case was a little different, however. One night, I received a simple message from one of my friends via Facebook. “Hey, did you know that there’s, like, a lot of different animal emojis that you can send one another in here?”

I remember being amused by his excitement at such a small detail. His next message consisted of three animal emojis: a tiger, an octopus, and a wolf—his favorite animals. I stared at the three emojis for a few minutes before answering. There was something about looking at the animals in context of a human’s excitement that made me have an interesting thought. I knew the reason my friend liked the animals was because he felt they represented him at some level. He felt very excited that Facebook had designed animal emojis that he could share because, in a way, the presence of said emojis felt like representation to him. Additionally, there was something very intriguing about the juxtaposition of the three animals that made me want to explore the concept both visually and as a personal representation.

Octavia’s Birth

“It’d be really cool to develop these animals as characters,” I said to my friend. “Yeah! It would be! But… what sort of anthropomorphic combination would you go for?” This question stayed in my mind long after our conversation was done. Since we both shared a love for octopi, it was obvious that said animal would be my experimental character. Upon deciding to work with an octopus, the question became, “how do I make an octopus anthropomorphic?” When I revisited the idea, pencil and paper in hand, I explored different versions of the same concept. Early on, however, I decided that I liked the idea of an octopus head on a girl’s body. From that moment on, the character basically designed herself, and her name came just as naturally: Octavia. It means eight, which is only fitting since octopi have eight tentacles. Her last
name, Mauve, came out of the French term for purple because Octavia's skin is purple. With the idea of personal representation in mind, I began to think about what sort of qualities an octopus possesses that I identify with. For instance, octopi are considered one of the most intelligent and crafty of the animal species. They have been known to work through puzzles to attain rewards, when facing predators, they escape through the means of ink ejection and retreat, and they also have the ability to blend into their surroundings well enough to seem practically invisible to any creature around them.

Although it might sound a bit presumptuous, I identified all these reasons as personal identifiers. I do consider myself to be a fairly intelligent person, especially when it comes to conceptualizing and researching. Although I have come to realize that I have to confront people about healthy boundaries, what comes most naturally to me in a fight or flight situation is flight. Ironically, like the octopus, I do use ink as something to hide behind on a daily basis, as one of my biggest artistic passions is inking. I try to blend into my surroundings as much as I can, often choosing solitude over the spotlight. Noticing how different I am, however, is very easy, be it because of my big curly hair, or because I am very blunt about thinking of said cost was easy because of personal experience.

**Beautiful/Broken**

I was born to a seventeen-year-old mother and a sixteen-year-old father, both of which had had very unstable childhoods. Due to instability, my mother left me in my father and grandmother’s care. Being the daughter of a young creator is perhaps the most defining influence in my life, outside of finding Christ and making a decision to allow him to transform my life. As a young man, my father was very ambitious in his pursuits. He went to college and worked all while taking care of a young girl who looked up to him in literally everything.

He was gifted in many areas ranging from musical arts, performing arts, and visual arts. This, however, he often tried to pair and back up with deep intellectual pursuits ranging from philosophy to psychology. He wasn’t without fault, of course. His mind’s ability to think creatively also allowed for a lot of insecurity. While he longed to be part of a social group, whenever he succeeded to integrate, he always felt he was misunderstood and marginalized, which resulted in him leaving said group on the basis of their apparent prejudice against him. He often thought that people were “out to get him,” so he created relationships as easily as he abandoned them. He was often very envious of others’ talents—he was threatened by anyone who he perceived was better than him. Still to this day, it was very interesting to see his personal duality play out in self-destructive and self-fulfilling prophecies.

My multitalented, deep-thinking father was diagnosed bipolar when I was 14 years old. Although with some research and time, I have come to believe that he was misdiagnosed, the presence of mental illnesses has been more than obvious in my life. As I have looked at my family history, development, and tendencies, it is more than obvious to me that with or without psychiatric diagnosis, many of us aren’t exactly sane. My father’s duality between beauty and brokenness had been a perpetuating cycle in my family tree for decades. So with that in mind, I found that I was no stranger to the concept of good character traits and bad accompanying character traits. Not only had I dealt with it my whole life, as it was exemplified by my father, and my grandmother soon after, I have been dealing with my personal version of said dualism for a few years.

**Flesh/Spirit**

Looking so deeply in a mirror which reflected the harsh reality of my beauty/brokenness put me through a period of depression—and to this day, it still does in some instances. It was hard for me to understand that I would never be perfect; at least not while in this world. Whatever good there was in me would always be overshadowed by the evil portions of me. Although I have known of the Lord for most of my life, it wasn’t until about 10 years ago that I decided to fully convert to biblical ways. This conversion has required me to look at the word of the Lord as truth and the source of all healing. In the midst of my realization, I was reminded of struggle that Paul had in Romans 7.

At some point, he writes, “So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (Romans 7:19 NIV). In that moment, Paul was speaking about his desire to do good according to the Lord’s law, but his utter helplessness to be able to do so in light of “his flesh”, which is a direct result of humanity being, “unspiritual, sold as slave[s] to sin” (Rom 7:14b NIV).

In Romans 8, Paul provides valuable insight to our unsettling struggle, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” (Rom 8:5 NIV). It should be noted that our deeds and striving to be good and perfect will never be good enough to earn us salvation—we have tried and failed. This, however, is part of the reason Jesus Christ died on the cross: To fulfill the law and pay for our shortcomings. In a way, Jesus’ sacrifice ratified our free will. Instead of either living as if we were righteous and being as far removed from the word as possible, or haunted by wanting to do what is right and being tied down by our flesh, knowing Christ allows us to know the Spirit, and knowing the Spirit allows us to understand what is truly good.
To know the Spirit is to have a choice between flesh and light. This very thought became the heart of Animal Heads as a webcomic. My main concern, however, was how to voice this to a mainly unbelieving audience without sounding accusatory. No one wants to hear an accusatory message, especially in modern times where ideas about self-discovery in the context of relativity and hedonism are prevalent.

I wanted to find a visual way to show how a person’s mind works against them and how our culture teaches us to embrace its abuse. Furthermore, I wanted to postulate the question, “why do you do the things you do?” and “do you really have a choice when its only you and your mind?” This is how the concept of the familiars was born.

In Octavia’s world, a familiar is a spiritual entity invisible to anyone other than their animal host. It hovers around them instructs them how to be themselves. The Familiar is usually in the form of the host’s image: since Octavia is an octopus, her familiar is an octopus. Every animal, including Octavia, has socio-culturally been instructed to follow the familiar’s command blindly, never asking themselves why they should do it. What these familiars are telling their hosts, however, isn’t all that sane. For instance, it isn’t uncommon to see events like “pre-obituaries” in social media and newspapers when a familiar whispers to their host that they are no longer fit to live, and then for the host to accept this as truth. When the host confirms, familiars communicate with one another and share the unfortunate information. Familiars then tell their hosts about what the animal in question is going to do and suggest that the informed animals throw a “pre-oby,” which is basically a pre-suicide party. The hosts aren’t exactly celebrating the fact that an animal will kill themselves—they just think of it as a good time to have fun, often not even inviting the animal about to commit suicide to the party at all.

The idea of the animal host being controlled by their familiar is equivalent to how I sometimes feel about my flesh and the evil inclinations that I will forever battle. Without Christ, I am not even able to distinguish between what is me and what is my evil nature. Society teaches us to embrace virtue and vice alike merely because you are to love yourself as you are. Much like Octavia’s society, our society says that you ought to do what feels right to you, regardless of how absurd it may be. The question is, what happens when what “feels right to you” is what your flesh is telling you is the right thing to do? What if this were actual evil and it corrupted you to the core, often bringing instant gratification at the expense of moral degradation, feelings of unfulfillment, depression, anxiety, and ultimately, a worthlessness so devastating that it ends in nihilistic life philosophies? What is the point of life if there isn’t any real validity to it outside of constantly trying to make yourself happy? What happens when you get tired of trying?
When I was young, I keenly remember noticing that my father’s demeanor changed depending on where he was. For instance, with ladies, he would be a total flirt, while with teachers he would strive to be seen as the teachers’ pet. Sometimes, in order to fit in, he would put on a social mask of sorts, which he would quickly remove once he came home and he could criticize everyone to his heart’s desire. As I continued to observe people as well as my own behavior, I realized that Carl Jung might have had it right: people employ different masks in varying situations to better fit a context. Thus, we use masks to hide what our true nature is—or at least control how much of it comes out when in the presence of others.

If animals in Animal Heads represent a person’s personhood—traits they like and dislike about themselves, then the masks represent what they want to be perceived as. For instance, Octavia’s mask is comprised of book pages because she obsessively collects books and she wishes to be seen as an erudite. Her mask’s origami flower crown is meant to exemplify her paperfolding skills as well as serve as an external representation of her love for outer space: yellow for stars and purple for its mystery. Octavia admires her ability to voice her thoughts intelligently, which is why her mask has lips. She also likes lashes because she feels they make her feel feminine, which is why her mask has eyelashes and a cat-winged eyeliner. Both the eyes and the lip makeup is black because that is the color of her ink—her essence. Finally, she uses lace atop her crown and within the eyes as a way to veil herself from the outside world. Although she can see through the lace, it is very hard for people to see her eyes, which are the windows to the soul.

In a way, however, masks represent conformity to the system, especially when what the mask represents is far removed from who the animal actually is. A good example of this predicament is Trixie Voss’ case. Trixie is daughter to a mask designer (Maskenhersteller) and a famous mathematician. Since her parents went through a nasty divorce, Trixie has grown up with fear of abandonment and the idea that people can leave regardless of how much they ought not to. She spends most of the day asleep and wakes up to work her shifts at the Mean Bean Cafe and complete her online studies.

Her likes and dislikes change sporadically, as she is constantly on a quest to define who she is but is constantly turning up empty, and that scares her to no end. She is, however, very clever and very manipulative, often using charm and half-truths to get her way. It isn’t uncommon for people to feel like they are on a rollercoaster when it comes to her feelings towards them. One second, she desperately needs them to be around, the next, especially in the case of someone who has offended her, she wants absolutely nothing to do with them, often cutting them off like hairdressers cut off split ends. Trixie’s mask, however, is specifically designed to make her look tame.
and balanced. The color is mostly white and pink to demonstrate child-like daintiness. There are no sharp edges to her mask, only swirls and curves which are meant to present her as a smooth and easygoing individual. Unlike her intense makeup and her dyed red hair, Trixie’s mask is innocent-looking because that’s what she thinks herself to be: a victim of circumstance. As the story progresses, however, it becomes apparent that although Trixie considers herself to be the victim, she actively takes decisions as per her familiar’s instruction, that create self-fulfilling prophesies: she wants to love and be loved, but animals always leave, and thus, they are deserving of her wrath.

In Octavia’s case, if her mask represents her need to fit in, her locket represents her desire to be her true self outside of the familiar’s control. Perhaps one of the biggest reasons as to why I have decided to follow the Lord is my grandmother, who not only made the decision for Christ, but also prayed that someday I would come to Him wholeheartedly. She showed me that I was loved and valued despite the feelings of worthlessness my flesh had tried to instill in me. When I was convinced I didn’t belong and that I should have never been born, my grandmother would cite Jeremiah 1:5 to me, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart” (NIV).

Although this information didn’t make an immediate impact in my life, it became one of the most important reasons as to why I turned to Christ in a moment where I thought my life didn’t have much value and I didn’t know what to do with it.

Octavia’s locket was given to her by her grandmother before she passed away. Her grandmother, Aureum Mauve, was a very unusual animal. In fact, she had been locked up in an asylum for some portion of her life because she spoke about there being a choice they weren’t being given between a familiar and the Light. Since questioning familiars was seen as taboo, Aureum’s behavior as well as her claims were taken as insanity. Despite her reputation, Octavia was very fond of her grandmother. They shared a love for books and literature, so Octavia would spend many hours with her “grammy” before her parents deemed her a bad influence. Before they departed, Aureum gave Octavia a locket: an octopus guarding a book. She said, “We are so much more than what our familiars tell us we are.

This locket will remind you of that.” The locket was given in secrecy, so Octavia’s parents didn’t know about its importance, let alone the message it held inside: “lux et veritas”. Although Octavia’s disappointment over life’s meaninglessness would overshadow her grandmother’s words, she held on to that locket as part of her daily appearance: a sign that despite the darkness of her mind, there was still the hope for a light.
My Little Prince and His Struggles

Another very important reason I decided to explore the topic of mental illnesses and suicide was because of my little brother, who has always been my little prince, as per Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s book by the same title: like the prince, my brother has always been curious about that which he doesn’t understand, has a very innocent and lovely demeanor about him, and is willing to learn in his time.

I began to see that what had affected my grandmother, my father, and me, was starting to affect him. At an early age, he started to display uneasy restlessness—the kind that made him use entertainment as a way to numb his mind. The kind that made him fight for people’s attention or else jealousy and envy would take hold and result in angry fits. The kind that made him get in trouble in school for saying that he wanted to kill himself.

A year after that, my little brother was diagnosed with ADD and high functioning Autism. When I heard he had said that he wanted to end his life, my heart broke for him because I knew exactly where he was coming from. I began to look at different ways to relate to him and show him that he wasn’t alone in his struggle, that the Lord created him with a purpose and that he was incredibly valuable despite whatever his mind was telling him.

Him, his older brother, and his little sister, my babies, had all endured so much already, and they were special beyond words could ever say. This project is the result of my desire to research and create something that perhaps might relate to them and other kids in their age group, and to tell them that there is hope to their struggles—both the ones they deal with and the ones they can’t even explain.
The next step, after thinking deeply about how I wanted Animal Heads to represent my personal experiences as well as have a commentary concerning sociocultural mental health practices, suicide, and presented solutions, was looking at how each character would play a specific part, and in which context they would do so. I decided almost immediately that the setting needed to be incredibly simple and ordinary for the purposes of relatability. Octavia’s town, for instance, is called “The Town”. She goes to “The High School,” and is aspiring to get into “The Erudite University of Pharmaceutics” although she secretly desires to be accepted into “The University of Astronautics”. Although the coffeeshop’s name is “The Mean Bean”, most animals just call it, “The Coffeeshop”.

Characters and their familiars are meant to represent a mental state or a mental illness. For instance, Octavia’s familiar instructs her to obsess over things like collecting books and stuffed animals, to wash her hands three or four times just to make sure that there are no harmful bacteria left, and that there needs to be bilateral symmetry in anything she creates in order to make it perfect. Sometimes, it will play the same thoughts in Octavia’s head over and over again—even if Octavia doesn’t want the thoughts to be there. As per research, these are some of the symptoms a person with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder might experience. In Whitney’s case, her familiar starts off by whispering things that could go wrong. As time goes by, the whispers get louder. Soon, her chest tightens, she begins to experience heart palpitations and a pounding headache. Her breathing becomes short and rushed, and she is unable to stop herself from thinking about her fear. She succumbs to the attack between sobs. These are all symptoms someone with Panic Disorder will regularly experience.

Part of the reason I’ve decided to put this detail into the narrative is because I wish to address that, despite whatever the cause of a mental disorder is, its presence doesn’t define the individual and that there are alternatives as to how to deal with them. Specifically, I want to highlight that one of the ways someone can deal with mental illnesses is through Christ and Biblical counseling, as is the case with Whitney who learns to listen to the Light as opposed to her familiar—no matter how loud the familiar gets.

The Light serves as a counterpart to the familiar: if the familiar communicates with the host in destructive ways, the Light speaks to the host about love, order, and true identity. As opposed to familiars, the Light isn’t something animals are born with. They have to consciously decide to let the Light in before it can begin to attempt to influence. The presence of the Light doesn’t mean automatic change. It represents the possibility of a change—the possibility of a choice. The animal still needs to choose between the familiar and the light moment by moment.
List of Characters

Octavia Mauve:
Octopus. A rigid high school senior who has ensnared herself in the fallacy of being perfect, specifically in regard to her academic achievements. Represents Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Whitney Cobello:
Dwarf Hotot Rabbit. A sweet, caring, and multi-talented high school senior who uses her struggles in life to help others learn about the Light. Represents Panic Disorder.

Henry Bunglon:
Chameleon. A very tech-driven high school senior who seeks to imitate others obsessively. Represents low self-esteem struggles.

Barkley Armani:
White Wolf. A college freshman who is externally a partydog, but internally a deep feeler and peacekeeper. Represents misuse of empathy (enabling tendencies).

Trixie Voss:
Red Fox. A sporadic, seductive, and dramatic college freshman trying to find the importance of life and if hers has any value. Represents Borderline Personality Disorder.

Carol Suricatta:
Meerkat. A very temperate and observant counselor who guides The High School seniors in their next steps of life.

Liam Ränder:
Tiger. Swedish Chemical Engineer and proud PhD recipient. He was an action movie star, but he retired in order to go in full time as a famous chemistry T.V. show host.

Kayla Cinereus:
Koala. A very lazy high school senior who doesn’t care for much more than sleeping and eating.

Jericho Livingston:
Black Cat. An edgy college sophomore who trusts only selected few due to trauma and abuse in her past.

Odette Barnu:
Owl. A very wise and sweet high school senior. Light Bearer.

Mildred Gray:
Squirrel. A skittish and diligent college freshman who is breedist towards birdkind.

Arthur Flehmen:
Dutch Landrace Goat: A egocentric, temperamental, and selfish college sophomore who seeks to let the world know that he is a big deal. Represents Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

Carol Suricatta:
Meerkat. A very temperate and observant counselor who guides The High School seniors in their next steps of life.

Liam Ränder:
Tiger. Swedish Chemical Engineer and proud PhD recipient. He was an action movie star, but he retired in order to go in full time as a famous chemistry T.V. show host.

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Odette Barnu:
Owl. A very wise and sweet high school senior. Light Bearer.

Mildred Gray:
Squirrel. A skittish and diligent college freshman who is breedist towards birdkind.

Virginia Piya:
Harpy Eagle. A larger-than-life sort of college Junior. Works at The Library and makes sure rules are properly followed.

Familiars:
Appearance (although invisible to most animals) is usually specific to animal host. Spiritual entities that tell their host who they are, how they are to be who they are, and what to do in order to be significant. Said goals are often false premises—they have no realistic method of achievement to them. Animals are born with familiars and socio-culturally conditioned to listen to them regardless of how absurd their commands are.

The Light:
Appearance (although invisible to most animals) is consistently an orb of white light. Spiritual entities that give their hosts the ability to choose between listening to their familiar or learning about a hidden truth about themes such as life, existence, love and order. It teaches that self-validation and worth are not dependent on the animal’s deeds, but in the principle of intelligent design (a concept further explored as the story progresses). Animals are not born with the Light; they must choose for it. Those who do choose for it are often marginalized.
further showcased by the fact that no matter what outfit Barkley is wearing, he will always have a circle (meant to signify the moon) featured somewhere in his outfit. Yet another connection comes from Whitney and Trixie’s relationship, which is inspired by Native American lore.

Some animal characteristics are meant to serve as base for connectivity between animals. For instance, both octopi and chameleons share the ability to camouflage against their surroundings. Out of the main characters, both Octavia and Henry employ social camouflage tactics the most often, a habit that at some point causes them to have breakdowns. It is through this common experience that they learn to trust each other and work through their issues together.

Because wolves tend to be pack animals, one of Barkley’s hallmark traits is being the “peacekeeper” of any group he is a part of, as to ensure the group stays together. In Arthur’s case, since goats tend to charge head on towards a threat, one of his defining characteristics is hardheaded.

Some animals literally represent real-life people. For instance, Liam Ränder represents Dolph Lundgren who attained his master’s in chemical engineering before heading into television as an actor, director, screenwriter, film producer and martial artist.

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**Story “Easter Egg” Details**

Each of the character names have something to do with the character thesis. For instance, Whitney Cohello means “white rabbit.” Trixie is inspired by the name “Vixie,” which derives from vixen, or female fox, and the word “trickster.” Her last name, Voss, is the Low German word for fox.

Some relationships between animals exist to give subtle nods to other narratives with the same characters. For instance, Trixie and Barkley’s romantic relationship represents a deconstructed retelling of The Little Red Riding Hood where Trixie (who goes by Red Chai) is the little red riding hood and Barkley is the “big bad wolf.” In this retelling, however, the ensnaring and consumption is done by Trixie through manipulation and guilt. As a result, Barkley is the willing victim of the story. Barkley, however, ends up realizing that his relationship with Trixie is toxic and that his friendship with Whitney is uplifting and natural. Barkley and Whitney’s romantic relationship is a nod to two traditions: a wolf’s need to howl at the moon, and the Chinese story of the moon rabbits. In the Animal Heads world, the Chinese myth of moon rabbits is also common knowledge. Because of his attraction towards the moon, Barkley has done extensive research on the moon both in scientific facts as well as lore and myth. Upon meeting Whitney, he instantly (and secretly) admired her merely because she was a white rabbit. His affinity towards the moon is
Creative Process and Character Design

Although Octavia’s design came fairly naturally to me, I explored many different stylistic iterations just to make sure that Octavia’s appearance reflected what I wanted it to. I did visual research on certain elements I wanted Octavia to have: Japanese school uniforms, headbands, school shoes/heels, etc. After having created a Pinterest board that held every single picture I found relevant, I narrowed down my choices by creating two mood boards, both holding between 7-10 images each. The purpose of this exercise was to explore what physical components would inform my character design.

The next step would be to find and recreate different examples of other artists work that displayed elements I was particularly interested in. Because I grew up in the 90s, one of the first examples to come to mind was Sailor Moon. I was particularly interested in how they drew their anatomy (long leg, short torso,) and how they drew school uniforms. I also explored Jorge Gimenez version of Wonder Woman, mostly because of line usage and rendering.

Because my desired direction for Animal Heads involves creating a webcomic, I explored how other webcomic artists had approached school uniforms, anatomy, and even color choice. Leanne Krecic’s Lets Play, Rachel Smythe’s Lore Olympus, and Stephanie Qgimco’s I Love Yoo were my top choices for exploration.

After having done character recreations, I proceeded to make Octavia character silhouettes. Although I already had a very good idea as to how Octavia would look, I decided to further explore other options just to see what would result from them. After I created thirty silhouettes, I narrowed my choices down to my favorite five. Then, I lowered layer opacity and did rough sketches over the silhouettes, lightly fleshing the character out. I was especially interested in seeing Octavia’s stylistic differences, were she to be part of a different universe. I asked myself, what would Octavia look like if she were a magical girl like the ones that appear in Sailor Moon? What would she look like if she were a Power Puff Girls villain? What would she look like as a Roman warrior?

These were very fun to make because they allowed me to explore her in different settings and even opened up the possibility of stylistic changes for the sake of better communicating a story. For example, if the chapter I were illustrating had an “Alice in Wonderland” feel to it, I could skew my style to fit what is commonly associated with the narrative: dresses, surrealistic elements, etc. Additionally, I was able to explore what some emotions could look like for Octavia. This was the case with one of the exaggerated forms I drew Octavia as. Her wide stance, stiff arms, and wild tentacles showed the sort of territorial dominance and aggression Octavia would exhibit were she to be pushed to her limits. Once I had explored exaggerated iterations of Octavia, I was able to draw back and tighten Octavia’s original design to include more of my newfound elements immediately. Her design went from looking like a generic school girl to a believable high school senior who wished to be taken seriously while still displaying interest elements as part of her image. A minimalized version of this process—mood boards, character style sketches, character silhouettes, and character iterations—were employed to reach character conclusions.
Building the Mask

Reasoning

Masks are incredibly important in the Animal Heads universe, not only because it is a huge industry, but because they are the animal’s perceived identity. There are many aspects that I took into consideration when creating all the masks. In Octavia’s case, because of the nature of the mental condition she represents, I first had to think about how a person with OCD would build things. Since research shows that they are very prone to create in asymmetry, I had the choice of either exploring asymmetry as a way to break away from the familiar’s instruction or making symmetrical designs as a way to show submission to the familiar. After sketching out many variations of the mask, I decided that since Octavia is at a very early stage of her development, where she isn’t exposed to the Light, it would make better sense to have her sport a perfectly symmetrical design. As the story progresses, however, I will use the gradual introduction of asymmetry as a symbol of her breaking free from the familiar’s dominance.

After deciding for symmetry, there were a few ideas to explore for the mask’s creation. These ideas needed to be chosen in a very specific order, however, since said order reveals a lot about the animal in question’s personality, motives, and level of deceit their masks portray. The first aspect to consider was what sort of financial status Octavia’s mask would reveal. The Mauve family wasn’t exactly known to be the richest in the neighborhood, which explains their constant pursuit of success. Thus, Octavia cannot afford to have her mask custom-made by important Maskenherstellers. She can, however, buy a generic mask from the store, and build it up to be what she wants it to be. Because Octavia’s mask is handmade and she struggles with OCD, her mask must be a human version of perfect, which allows for the attempt at perfect symmetry, but room for human error.

The next element I explored was what sort of interests Octavia would consider attributes to perfection. Since she collects books, which to Octavia are the perfect source of information and entertainment, I thought having the mask completely covered with different sections of a page from an old, unsalvageable book, would fit her aesthetic. Although she would never dream of tearing a book apart for the sake of fashion, she thought it would be a beautiful idea to repurpose a dying book. Another one of the more obvious interests Octavia possesses is space. She believes that space is a great example of perfection because it is the point of origin: for the most part, it exists without animal alteration. Additionally, as a person who struggles with OCD, Octavia doesn’t like specific textures, especially near her face. Thus, I decided to line the inside of her mask with soft cotton space-themed fabric. Because her interest in space is very personal, I used to line the top of the mask. To Octavia, although the nature of lace is soft and delicate, its black color makes it mysterious and edgy.

Lastly, because Octavia thinks her eyes are obnoxiously blue, she decided to obscure the eye holes with black lace, which she also used to line the top of the mask. To Octavia, although the nature of lace is soft and delicate, its black color makes it mysterious and edgy.

Physical Components

In order to create Octavia’s mask, I had to buy a generic white plastic base, which I proceeded to manipulate by cutting off the nose and narrowing the cheeks down. Next, I lined the inside of the mask with the space fabric using a hot glue gun. Because the space fabric lining is meant to be a hidden component, laying down that foundation and then building on top of it was easier than making the external layers and then hiding the backside. Once the fabric was secured, the next step was to cut the book page so that it would fit different sections of the mask. I had to be especially careful around curves—paper doesn’t naturally curve very well. Only one page was used in this process. Once this portion was completed, I created a “nose” out of the book page and pasted it in place. It isn’t obvious to the design, but there is a small origami butterfly underneath the nose. It is meant to represent a hidden sense of innocence and whimsicality. Because I wanted to both secure everything in place and add a shiny tocop to the mask, I proceeded to coat the exposed side with clear Elmer’s glue. I repeated this step twice.

Next, I constructed the Origami flowers. The biggest flower is called a kusudama flower, and the smaller, star-like ones are the backides of traditional origami flowers. I experimented with various sizes while using my model sketch as reference. Those were mounted on to the mask with hot glue and secured with clear Elmer’s glue as well. In this same step, I cut the eyeliner and lips out of black paper, then, using hot glue, I pasted them in their designated locations. I also used hot glue to fasten the false lashes onto the top borders of the eye holes. I didn’t want to leave them so pristine, so I burned them down a little bit, which allowed for a rounded tip and a shorter length for each lash. With all these elements in place, I repeated the Elmer’s clear glue step.
again. Once the glue was dry, I proceeded to spray the mask with Krylon Artist Spray UV-Resistant Clear Gloss. Since the Elmer’s glue had dried on so nicely, it only needed one coat. The mask's final details were in the lace: I hot glued a band covering the eyes on the backside, and I hot glued two straps on the top of the crown.

Because I didn’t want Octavia’s mask to merely be placed on top of a table without a context, I thought about the setting that one would most commonly see her mask when she wasn’t wearing it. I thought of my morning routine and how I had designated locations for things I would use most commonly. If someone were to wear a wig, for instance, they would most likely have a mannequin to hold that wig in place when it wasn’t being used. In Animal Heads, however, since there was no such thing as a human, I would have to either try to buy or build an octopus head mannequin. I had no luck buying one online, and just as I was about to begin building the octopus head mannequin, I had a better idea. Since Octavia was all about repurposing dead books, using an old book’s hardcover into a mask-holding box would perhaps be one of her best ideas yet! So that’s exactly what I did. For this portion, I bought a box that posed as a book and lined the insides with the same space fabric I had used to line the inside of Octavia’s mask. Then, in order to give a more complete scene depiction, I decided to buy an octopus book locket and customize it by supergluing a small amethyst pebble onto the octopus’ forehead. This piece is to be displayed as part of the mask-holding book.
Story and Panel Work

Once I thought about what sort of story I wanted to tell and what sort of elements go into making the sort of story I want to tell, I decided to pass on that information to a screenwriter. I had the honor of working with Liberty University Cinema student, Charlie Benz, who looked at all the information I provided and helped me craft a sequence of events. Although he wrote the first book’s script, I used an extremely abridged version of the first four pages of his work in order to create the panels presented as part of my final deliverables. As per my committee’s request, since I didn’t need to illustrate the whole first chapter, I wanted to create Octavia’s introduction, which would serve as a means to get a reader interested in Animal Heads.

Charlie was incredibly helpful in that he was able to divide the script in panels. His panels, however, were written to accommodate a traditional comic book. Because of the scroll format most webcomics use, paneling had to be done differently than what is presented in a traditional comic book. For this reason, I once again referenced webcomics online to see how they handled paneling issues. I quickly realized that very seldom did they have panels side by side; they were often one below the other, often leaving large positive spaces so that the viewer’s eyes had resting spots. Because the paneled pages I created had to be printed as part of my deliverables, I adapted the webcomic artist’s style to fit three images per page.

My process for creating illustrations was to either take my own pictures and sketch, ink, and color them, or find images online similar to my idea and do the same process. Because my goal with Animal Heads is to create a webcomic out of it, and, since webcomic artists often create a chapter within a week, I wanted to keep color schemes simple. Each character has a “theme color” which will influence lighting, which will be mostly monochrome. This idea is most evident in the first few pages of Octavia’s introduction and in the two environment illustrations. I did, however, want to make these pages very special, so I chose to introduce more color as the story progressed. 
Chapter 4
Deliverables

Created Deliverables
Octavia’s Introduction:
Six illustrated and paneled pages telling Octavia’s premise.

Full-Page Illustration:
Octavia at the Mirror

Three environments and props:
The Mean Bean, Octavia’s View from the Front of Her House, and Preliminary Sketches of Octavia’s Mask

Five Illustrated Characters:
Henry, Whitney, Octavia, Barkley, and Trixie

Physical Component:
Octavia’s Mask

Octavia’s Introduction Script
Page one:
Alarm clock: BEEP BEEP
BEEP

Page two
Familiar: Wake up. Time to get ready.
Octavia: Wake up. Time to get ready. Or at least pretend I’m awake.
Familiar: No time to pretend. Get up.
Octavia: No time to pretend... get up.

Page three
Octavia: Who are you supposed to be, Octavia?
Octavia: Right... what am I supposed to be?
Familiar: Perfect. You are to be perfect.
Octavia: Am I to be perfect?

Page four
Familiar: Yes.
Octavia: Yes. I am to be perfect.

Page five
Octavia: This is the question that haunts me... Am I more than my perfect mask? Or will I always have to hide behind it?

Page six
Octavia: It’s not like it matters, anyway.
Familiar: You have no option.
Octavia: What’s the point of living...
Familiar: There is no purpose...
Octavia:... if I can’t be perfect?
Familiar: Outside of perfection.
WHO ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE, OCTAVIA?

NOT "WHO."

"WHAT."

RIGHT...

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO BE?

*FLUSH*

PERFECT

YOU ARE TO BE PERFECT.

AM I TO BE PERFECT....?

I AM TO BE PERFECT.

YES.
THIS IS THE QUESTION THAT HAUNTS ME...

AM I MORE THAN MY PERFECT MASK?

OR WILL I ALWAYS HAVE TO HIDE BEHIND IT?

IT'S NOT LIKE IT MATTERS, ANYWAY.

YOU HAVE NO OPTION.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF LIVING...

THERE IS NO PURPOSE...

...IF I CAN'T BE PERFECT?

OUTSIDE OF PERFECTION
Chapter 5

Conclusion & Future Plans

Animal Head’s Future
As mentioned before, it is my goal to continue working with Charlie Benz and make Animal Heads a webcomic. Although nothing will ever replace the importance of traditional comic books, I do believe that its future lies in webcomics. I have seen great success come from webcomic artists who get to harbor a following, do what they love, and share a message. Through Animal Head’s narrative, I wish to address those who struggle with mental illnesses, suicidal thoughts, or life struggles in general, and to let them know that there is indeed a choice between what your mind and society are telling you your reality is.

Furthermore, and most importantly, I want to show them that that choice is found in the Light, which is Christ. Although that is the core of my message, Animal Heads is inherently designed to be quirky enough to attract a secular audience. As I eluded to above, part of my goal is to be able to infiltrate the pop culture scene and be able to subliminally influence it with subliminal messages—or at least vouch for the validity of biblical counseling for mental illnesses.

Areas of Further Development
As per my research, the at-risk demographic for suicide is ages 10-24. Because Animal Heads only addresses ages 18-22 of this demographic, I would love to find ways to address the younger audience members who struggle with the same issues. Because of the vast difference in age and maturity, I would need to be conducting a lot of research on childhood development, storytelling for children, and find out what stylistic choices would appeal to a younger audience. As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest incentives for this thesis was my little brother’s struggles, so the area of children’s comics and literature are still very near and dear to my heart.

Although I lightly researched this area for this thesis already, I plan on conducting further research into Biblical counseling and its practical applications. While doing research for this thesis, I was able to see that there is a difference between Biblical Counseling and Christian psychology: one is based upon the Bible as a knowledge base, while the other is based upon Christianized psychology as a knowledge base. Still, because the nature of Animal Heads is to use the Bible as source of truth and development, the moment I stop studying scripture and professional opinions on it is the moment I risk deviating from Animal Head’s original point. Thus, biblical studies and research will continue to be topics of constant research for me.
**Personal Findings**

This thesis was a huge process for me in areas such as education and academia as well as my spiritual and emotional well-being. It certainly wasn’t an easy journey—the long hours of research, the many creative blocks I had to pray over and rework, and the few tears I cried while contemplating on the darkness of life only ever brought me back to one conclusion: how thankful I am to the Lord for His guidance. I am deeply convinced that despite the rise in suicide and mental illnesses, there are choices for therapy and treatment, one of which is Biblical Counseling. The goal of this thesis isn’t to convince anyone that Jesus Christ holds all the answers, but rather to help those who read it to understand His message as a valid means of treatment and counseling. In essence, much like the Light does for the animal, this thesis is merely here to represent a choice.
Bibliography


