

I, DANIEL BLAKE: A FILM REVIEW

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I, Daniel Blake is a Ken Loach film. Anyone familiar with this British film director will know that his films resonate with a strong sense of social justice and standing up for the working class and the oppressed. His films convey resilience in his characters as they struggle for survival in systems that often reduce people to numbers and strip them of their humanity.

Daniel Blake is a 59-year-old widowed carpenter recovering from a heart attack and attempting to re-join the workforce but seeking support allowance from the British government while he waits for employment. The film opens with Daniel being asked a series of questions from a healthcare professional who sounds like an automaton, devoid of any compassion or empathy. Anyone who has ever waited in line for a bureaucrat to attend to them will empathise with the frustration Daniel feels when he attempts to find out why his support allowance has been ceased but is treated with contempt, hostility and even suspicion.

Daniel is caught up in a vicious cycle – he is unable to work until he is cleared to do so by his medical practitioners, but to receive benefits he must look for work, despite being ordered to rest as part of his recovery. He is unable to use a computer but is required to construct a resume and apply for work online. His financial resources are dwindling, and he feels humiliated when he tries to speak to anyone in the government department to request assistance. One social worker who tried to help him was reprimanded by a superior and told it wasn't her job to provide actual assistance. When he raises his voice in desperation, security guards are called to remove him.

Daniel has a well-developed sense of generosity and kindness and he refuses, in spite of being besieged at every step, to give in ... his resilience is inspiring. He even takes on the role of defender when he observes a young single mum and her two children being turned away from the government office, late for an appointment because her bus was running late. Daniel becomes her

¹ I, Daniel Blake [online image]. Retrieved August 8, 2018 from: https://images.pagina12.com.ar/styles/focal_16_9_960x540/public/2017-06/na34fo01.jpg?itok=NXsBuOEn

protector when he sees her desperate situation. Both Katie, the young Mum, and Daniel retain their hope and dignity in the face of insurmountable odds, and many of the scenes where they are helping each other are heart-warming.

The film reminds us how faceless bureaucracies can strip people of their humanity, but it is also a celebration of the decency of ordinary people who look after each other when all else fails them. One of the most moving scenes in the film is when Katie visits a food bank to get food to feed her children and, almost collapsing from hunger, eats from a tin of baked beans. The scene displays incredible empathy for her plight, reduced to such circumstances, but in viewers it also evokes anger that anyone should be reduced to such humiliation. This film is a 'must see' for anyone who works in bureaucratic systems including healthcare systems. I, Daniel Blake will encourage viewers to think about how intimidating and dehumanising such systems can be, and how empathic encounters can transform people's experiences.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IDEAS

Review the scene at the job centre where Daniel meets Katie for the first time

Katie and her two children, new to Newcastle, get lost on the way to the job centre and miss an appointment to sign on to receive benefit payments. Katie is threatened with a sanction, meaning that she will not receive the money she needs. Katie becomes upset and a member of the job centre staff tells her that she is creating a scene. Daniel steps in to support her.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ-rBLtP1Ow>

- What do we learn about Daniel's character in this scene?
- Recall a time in which you witnessed or were involved in a situation where a member of the public stood up for a stranger. What happened and what was the impact on you?

Review the scene where Daniel makes repairs to Katie's house and Katie gives him food.

When Katie only has a piece of fruit, Daniel tries to decline her kindness, but Katie says 'please, it's the least I can do'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkNTjcuB4iQ>

Discuss some of the other examples of kindness and empathy in this film.

Examples:

- Katie's treatment at the Food Bank
- The strangers who help Daniel in the library
- The woman in the Job Centre who tries to assist Daniel with his forms.

Reflect on the scene where Daisy visits Daniel at his home and shouts through the letterbox when he doesn't answer the door.

Daniel is at his lowest ebb. He has sold all his furniture and he is ill at home, wrapped in a blanket in his empty house. Daisy, Katie's daughter, comes to visit to find out why he hasn't been to see them. Daisy shouts through the letterbox 'you helped us, why can't we help you'.

Why do you think Daniel would not accept the help being provided by Daisy and Katie at that time?

Daniel writes a letter that he intends to read at his appeal, but instead it is read by Katie at his funeral.

*I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user.
I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar nor a thief.
I am not a national insurance number, nor a blip on a screen.
I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so.
I don't tug the forelock but look my neighbour in the eye.
I don't accept or seek charity.
My name is Daniel Blake, I am a man, not a dog.
As such I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect.
I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, nothing less. Thank you.*

In this letter, Daniel rejects the terms used of him by the 'system'. How do you think he would like us to define him?

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Identify situations in the film where people are treated in a de-humanising manner. Suggest alternative responses, which illustrate empathy and compassion.
2. Discuss situations in the film where empathy was demonstrated.
3. If you were 'walking in Daniel's shoes', what thoughts and feelings might you have during key scenes in the film?

TRAILER FROM I, DANIEL BLAKE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahWqwx9E_h4

LINKS

I, Daniel Blake is very real, The Economist:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8jbvgkicso>

We showed I, Daniel Blake to people living with the benefits system: here's how they reacted:

<http://theconversation.com/we-showed-i-daniel-blake-to-people-living-with-the-benefits-system-heres-how-they-reacted-73153>

We, Daniel Blake: Readers on the UK benefits system:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/26/welfare-sanctions-ken-loach-uk-benefit-system>

I, Daniel Blake roundtable with director, Ken Loach:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMpU7Dhd9Z0>

REFERENCES

Loach, K. (Dir.), (2016). *I, Daniel Blake* [motion picture]. Sixteen Films, London.

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