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A Carrier Without Sympathy

Mary Mallon was an Irish immigrant woman who earned her wages as a cook during the eighteenth century. But that's not the reason why she's well-known. She was the first identified asymptomatic carrier of typhoid in the United States. In this paper, I'll briefly look over the incidents that gave Mary Mallon the name and title of 'Typhoid Mary' and analyze Mary's positionality and George Soper's storytelling to understand the situation at the time and the methods authorities resorted to respond to Mary and one of the main ethical concerns regarding their methods, individual autonomy.

Typhoid is a bacterial infection that typically spreads via food and water that have been contaminated by salmonella. Some of typhoid's symptoms include fever, weakness and fatigue, diarrhea and stomach aches (Strochlic, 2021). At that time, a lack of proper sanitation resulted in delirium and death from typhoid. The outbreak of the disease in New York had put everyone in a frenzy. In a short amount of time, approximately 3000 people had been infected with typhoid. George Soper was a sanitation engineer at the time who had been hired to investigate the origin of the typhoid outbreak in New York (Markel, 2014). Soper learned that Mallon would often serve ice cream with fresh peaches on Sunday to different families. When the source was traced back to a single carrier, Mary Mallon - someone who did not depict any symptoms herself - it broke out she was seen as a threat and danger to society and one that had to be contained (Strochlic, 2021).

She spent about a quarter of the century quarantined in a small house on the grounds of Riverside Hospital, isolated on North Brother Island, a tiny speck of land off the Bronx. She was put in isolation once in March, 1907 after which in 1910, a health commissioner helped free her where the condition to her freedom was to never cook again (Leavitt, 2000). Being an immigrant woman, she had little to none employment options so she resumed working as a cook because of which she was forced into isolation again in 1915 (Marineli, Tsoucalas, Karamanou, & Androutsos, 2013).

Her isolation being referred to as incarceration or imprisonment is highly debated even to this day. However there were obvious ethical concerns with her 'isolation'. Firstly, it is argued whether or not Mary even knew or understood why she was put in isolation. According to authorities and Soper's narrative, Mary failed to comply with the guidelines but since there was no argument from her side, it is unclear whether she was made aware of her condition as an asymptomatic carrier or comprehended the concept (given its newness). Secondly, the absence of a complete story is often overlooked. Soper is how people have known and heard of Mary to be Typhoid Mary and believed that to be written in stone but that's all they heard; they never heard the story from Mary's perspective. Health officials made it seem like Mary's imprisonment was the most logical solution for the threat she posed, and they justified their decision through scientific reasoning and moral obligations against illnesses and germs.

George Soper's storytelling had a significant impact in the way the general public perceived Mary Mallon. His story was rooted in scientific knowledge and his way with words made it further convincing. By contrasting the irony between her immunity to typhoid in scientifically unknown ways and her serving as a breeding ground for typhoid bacteria, Soper

showcased her as an imminent threat to humankind that established social and medical grounds for her imprisonment. He portrayed her and Typhoid in unison and called upon the solution to the problem to be individual and communal social responsibility of cleanliness and isolation (Wald, 2008). His work as a sanitation engineer was supportive of the germ theory and the latest research that had been done in the medical field. This solidified people's belief in science since it was the only plausible and realistic solution to the outbreak. The idea of a healthy human being spreading disease and death was so ironic, new and profoundly scary that people had mixed emotions towards the situation and were unsure of how to respond. This is where Soper's storytelling channeled those emotions into a specific direction that led to her being seen as an evil and monstrous being that was nothing more or less than a threat to the wellness of the entire community.

These narratives gave rise to a famous image in a newspaper article that was representative of the outbreak and Typhoid Mary. It was a picture of Mary Mallon cooking, with her hands holding and cracking eggs into a pan on a burning stove, except that the eggs were tiny human skulls (image added in references). This was an interestingly intriguing piece of art because it accurately captured the fear, irony and duality that people thought Mary Mallon possessed. You can see what can only be perceived as an innocent woman with her hair neatly tied in a bun and her waist hugged by an apron, focusing her attention to the stove she's in front of. Plot twist: she's smashing and cracking human skulls into the burning pan; she's cooking death. Cooking is the creation of something unique, interesting, appetizing, of something that can only bring one joy so 'cooking death' acted as an ironic oxymoron.

Mary's positionality played an important role in her being controlled by health authorities. She was the very first asymptomatic carrier of an illness identified in the United

States and because of the sheer newness of the situation, people were unsure of their emotions - fear being one of them. The typhoid outbreak occurred during the early 1900s, a time during which the stereotype against immigrants had perpetuated America. It seemed easy to associate those uncontrollable waves of the fear of typhoid to the existing stereotype of fear of immigrants (Wald, 2008). Everything about her seemed unreal and unnatural to people, to the extent of alienating her for some groups. Her gender and occupational identity made an interesting parallel for people. This was a time where people vehemently believed that a woman's place was in the household, preferably in the kitchen. And Mary Mallon was a cook in a kitchen, just not one in a designated household which was threatening to the social norms then. All of these factors came into play to promote and protect white supremacy. For that, Soper's narrative was the cherry on top.

The idea of keeping Mary Mallon incarcerated (or quarantined) for so long was dismissive of her individual autonomy¹ (Christman, 2020). Any quarantine, particularly for almost three decades, becomes incarceration of a crime that is not on the books. By not explaining her situation, by exploiting her immigrant status, and by stripping her of her freedoms as a sovereign human being Mary Mallon can be (and should be) considered illegally detained and concentrated. As most Western and Liberal Democracies insist that the rights of an individual are born and given to any rational person regardless of their upbringing, one must come to the conclusion that either Mallon was wrongfully imprisoned or that she deserved to be imprisoned; this means that Mallon was to never be perceived as someone with sovereign human rights. Either ideas, with one definitely being more morally reprehensible than the other, both dismiss Mallon's idea of being an autonomous individual.

¹ Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent.

Throughout the story that Soper weaves of Mallon, many highlights of how we deal with people who are incarcerated now are present throughout. The first is that she was neither given a reason for her isolation and she was not allowed to have her perspective shown to the public. This perspective would have given Mallon some semblance to be treated as an individual who had agency. This is how many people are dealt with in the carceral system of the United States today, who spend years in jail cells awaiting trials and are not allowed to know their charges or when they will be released. These same incarcerated people are barred from their own agency to be more than a prisoner, as they are treated by their superiors with dehumanizing tactics such as calling them by their number or by another connotation. In Mary's case, she is called the dehumanizing "Typhoid Mary". This barrier from her own recognition as a human is textbook how structures of society deal with those they do not want to see as a human being, and is indicative of how important and closely tied her identity of being a disease carrier was to her name.

This largely also has to do with how Mallon is also a woman of an immigrant background, and one that is working. Not only does this intersect between race and gender (an Irish woman in the late 18th century would suffer extreme discrimination), but also class. Mallon was obviously working class, as she could not afford to stay home. This intersection and dynamic with social structures would have assured that society's affluent and ideological-repressive apparatuses would not have given her the time to be seen as a human being. Instead, Mary Mallon is nothing more than a disease spreader and a menace to society who should be locked up. Only part of that sentence was meant to be about her having Typhoid.

To continue, Mary as an individual stops being Mary Mallon but becomes Typhoid Mary as a symbol of the dangers of immigrants that we continue to see to this very day. Certain

sections and cleavages of society begin to be associated with diseases, pestilences, and viruses which lead not only to public perception tanking but also violence rising against these cleavages. Soper's narrative about unity against disease forgets that politics does and always will continue to happen *on the body*, it is not an ethereal menace. People get diseases, so people will always be a factor. People have a tendency to want to have their structurally exploitative cake and eat it too, so the biopolitics² (Liesen & Walsh, 2012) that occurs with diseases will continue to deepen hatred amongst groups instead of being a common moral enemy.

Her intersectional identity of being an immigrant working class woman coupled with Soper's storytelling and medical research at the time morphed the carrier into an independent identity on its own, one that people thought mattered more than any other identity she was associated with. And so she was treated like any other carrier of a contagious disease, just without the sympathy.

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² Biopolitics is a political wisdom taking into consideration the administration of life and a locality's populations as its subject

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