

Suffering, redemption and Dr. House

Joe Feuerherd | Dec. 5, 2008



Hugh Laurie as Dr. Gregory House

That glass of Merlot -- maybe my second -- set off the last episode.

Americans experience a lot of pain. More than half of us suffer intermittently or chronically from ailments of the head, the back, the stomach or the joints. We spend \$2 billion-plus each year on over-the-counter analgesics such as Tylenol and ibuprofen. “There’s a growing recognition that pain really is not just the sensation we have -- it’s something that interferes with every one of us, with life,” Dr. Raymond Gaeta, associate professor of anesthesia at the Stanford School of Medicine and director of pain management services at Stanford Hospital & Clinics, told *Science Daily* upon the release of a 2005 survey showing that 40 percent of pain sufferers have a significantly diminished quality of life.

Another doctor, this one fictional, brings the issue of pain into nearly 20 million American homes each week, and with it, wider and equally penetrating issues such as: Does physical pain have meaning? Is it redemptive? An analysis of “House” begins with the work of Gregory House, M.D., chief of the Department of Diagnostic Medicine at Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital, as he dramatically sleuths out the reasons for his patients’ pain and treats them for their anguish. And then there is his own pain -- the chronic, unremitting, never-goes-away kind -- resulting from a leg infarction that has transformed House into a Vicodin addict.

“I’m damaged,” House tells an attractive and considerably younger female colleague who seeks more than a professional relationship. House’s message, an act of kindness really: Don’t get too close or you will be too.

House, we learn as the series progresses, has suffered emotional torment throughout his life: an abusive father, a former lover who abandoned him when he most needed the connection, colleagues who disappoint. He is intensely intimate, commenting inappropriately on relationships of friends and strangers, and deeply private, retreating to his guitar or piano for moments of solace. Just when you think he might reach out to another human being, he backs away, afraid, presumably, of the pain. He is consummate healer and ultimate narcissist.

“House” is not foremost a medical drama. Instead, it’s a mystery, where relentless rationality and logic leads House (the title character is a play on Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Holmes”) and his colleagues, including best friend

Dr. Wilson (not Dr. Watson), to solve not the crime but the ailment. Like Holmes, House eliminates the possibilities (MRI tests for tumors, catheterizations for clots, bone marrow aspirations for diseases of the blood), leaving whatever is left, however improbable, as the culprit. Meanwhile, the ensemble engages in some of the usual fare of television drama -- breakups and matings, job loss and elevation, troubles with the boss -- though one suspects that even here "House" is a cut above regular television fare.

Religious themes, of course, prevail -- not just suffering but original sin, redemption, truth ("Everyone lies" is a favorite House diagnostic tool). House, however, is a committed atheist.

Both House and the actor who portrays him, Cambridge-educated Hugh Laurie, are accomplished musicians, so music is integral to the story. A Leonard Cohen song, "Hallelujah," sung by the late Jeff Buckley, concludes a second-season episode ("Acceptance") in which House breaks off the one relationship that might save him:

Maybe there's a God above,
As for me, all I've ever seemed
to learn from love
Is how to shoot at someone who
outdrew you.
Yeah but it's not a complaint
that you hear tonight,
It's not the laughter of someone
who claims to have seen the
light
No it's a cold and it's a very
lonely Hallelujah.
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
Hallelujah.

Does pain make us, assuming we survive, better people? House might scoff at the idea, but Dr. Carlo Valerio Bellieni, director of the Department of Newborn Intensive Therapy at the University Polyclinic Le Scotte in Siena, Italy, and a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, has a different perspective. He told ZENIT news service last year that House "is able to recognize suffering in others because of his own suffering and it is because of this that he can see things that may escape others."

"House never seems to be there for his patients," said Bellieni. "He is not a good doctor, he is full of pain; but he is rich with a meaningful question, which does not lead him to despair. For this reason he is impressive, in an age in which nothing seems to have value except one's own whims, especially in medicine."

House, says conservative Catholic blogger Thomas Peters, "is often a slave to the medical findings, and when given a choice, he prefers a medical finding that condemns the patient's virtue rather than trusting in human goodness."

Back to the cluster headaches.

The blood vessels in my brain contracted. I held back screams, placed hot compresses to my face. About 10 minutes from the onset, the suffering began to fade, slow but steady over the next quarter hour until I regained rationality.

What I knew from past experience is that the anguish would return like clockwork, every three-and-a-half hours for the next two to four weeks.

The search for the right drug, for the relief (liquid Lidocaine, steroids, oxygen) that worked three, five, seven, 10 years ago during previous episodes probably wouldn't work this time. Cluster headaches, it seems, adapt. The monster is evil, but not stupid. Please, God, oh, please God, make it stop!

I need Dr. House.

Then, 24 days after that glass of Merlot, as quickly as the pain came on, it stopped. No more ba-ba-ba-bum ba-ba-ba-bum. I am now 46 years old. Cluster headaches typically strike men in their late 20s and 30s. I haven't had an attack since that wine-induced event seven years ago.

Thank God.

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On the web

Starting Jan. 19, "House" moves to Mondays on FOX, 8 p.m. Eastern, 7 p.m. Central.

For more information on cluster headaches, visit www.clusterheadaches.com.

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