

Disability & Acceptance

Lehman College Spring 2018

LEH – 355

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The disabled population is the biggest minority group in the world. It is continuously growing in number and yet its acceptance by the non-disabled population of the world is low. This group is one that either many of us will one day join or someone close to us will join. This is a simple fact and yet those whom are disabled are portrayed in text and thus stigmatized from, is very different than one might think. How people with disabilities are accepted is through three different ways when it comes to both text and the real world. This is how they are accepted by non-disabled characters in text, how they accept themselves and how that impacts how disabled are accepted in the real world. This is what creates both the way and how we accept people with disabilities, which can lead to either positivity or despair.

In an essay by Paul K. Longmore "*Why I Burned My Book*", Longmore attempts to tackle how disabled individuals are portrayed as evil or monsters. He writes that television allows for this form of disconnect from real life issues. "That the problem is not as painful or as overwhelming as we fear, that it is manageable, or that it is not really our problem at all, but someone else's" Pg.132. This idea helps reinforce the negative stigmas that a disabled person is some object to be "managed". This is due to non-disabled people because they "harbor unspoken anxieties" which then become projected on the disabled population and manifests as something that is perceived and as scary.

Longmore goes on to point out that the disabled only get accepted as criminals or evil characters in films. He argues that this phenomenon can even result in type casting of an actor/actress into these negative roles, simply based on their outward physical appearance due to a disability. This idea is again cemented by the text or film, setting the audiences up to "disown its fear or biases by 'blaming the victims'" pg.34 instead of taking other factors into account. This means,

that any and all harm or misfortune that befell the disabled character was due solely to the actions of the disabled individual and therefore all fault/blame is there's alone.

This idea of “ostracism and destruction” pg.134, is also seen in John Steinbeck's “*Of Mice & Men*” through the disabled character Lennie. The story highlights two important points on how the disabled character is accepted and managed by all the non-disabled characters he comes in contact with. Firstly, Lennie is only accepted by George, his non-disabled partner, as someone to use for his brute strength and extra income. Secondly, Lennie is only accepted by the rest of the non-disabled characters as long as he remains useful, in his place, managed and not causing any trouble. This is shown by how George describes Lennie, “But he gets in trouble all the time because he's so god damn dumb” ph.41. Lennie is a benefit to George until his disability causes trouble.

The way disabled characters are accepted in text is as an object to be used or as an object to be destroyed. This was seen with Lennie as he was useful for money, company and protection, but once he caused trouble he was killed by someone close to him. Lennie was disposed of like Candy's dog. Steinbeck uses this theme of Lennie being an individual that causes trouble due to his disability, to justify killing him at the end of his book. Thus reinforcing Longmore's idea of the disabled character in texts being at fault for their own death. This therefore allows the reader to feel sympathy for characters like Lennie, yet at the same time not struggle with the choice to euthanize him, because the narrative bought the audience to this course of action which was justified due to the actions of the disabled character.

Violence towards the disabled population comes often in text and is almost always justified within the same text. It is one of the primary ways in which disabled individuals are accepted. This is seen in Junot Diaz's “*No Face*”, where the disabled character is referred to by only two names, “No Face” and “he”. This objectifies the disabled character by not even giving him a proper name

which helps allow the audience to not perceive him as a human but more as this thing to read about. Throughout his story, No Face is repeatedly met with violence at the hands of non-disabled characters. This comes in the form of verbal violence from the motor driver who yells at him saying “what the hell are you doing? You haven’t started eating cats have you?” pg.2. This was a verbal attack that was followed closely by a physical attack by the four boys who jumped him.

This story talks about the disabled character but focusing on what it takes for him to both be accepted by the non-disabled characters he encounters and to accept himself. He tries to get stronger to improve his physical appearance and he goes to a doctor to try and “fix” his face. He tries to make himself more “normal” to fit in with the non-disabled population yet is still met with either violence or mockery.

This way of how disabled individuals are accepted is also seen in Treves’s *“The Elephant Man”*. This is a story about a man who is extremely physically disabled. Yet the only way he is accepted by others is as a “thing” to be seen. Due to his disability, he is put on display for people to pay money to see as if he was some creature. Even when he is finally “saved” from this life, it is only to be further used as an object to be displayed and looked at. This however is meant to be perceived by the reader as a good action, although he is still being used his quality of life has increased. Yet to have this high quality of life, he must still deal with being this object just with a new owner.

The character accepts himself as this object because to him this is the only way to live his new life. But ultimately he dies trying to sleep like a “normal” person would by laying down flat on a bed. This is evidence that through it all he never truly accepted himself as he was but rather was striving to fit in to this category of normalcy similar to the character No-Face. Merrick’s death was even stripped of its meaning by the doctor who “saved” him. Instead of it being this tragedy

that he died, his death was turned into pity and it was Merrick's actions that lead to his death. This was done in one statement by the doctor in which he said that Merrick died following a "pathetic and hopeless" dream, which was that he wanted to sleep like everyone else. Instead of this being seen as the pains in which a disabled character was taking to feel accepted, it was instead marred and left as pity that this "thing" was never "normal" and solely an object that was now no longer of use.

Another text where acceptance of a disabled individual only happens because of their abilities is the movie "*Forrest Gump*". In this movie the main character is Forrest Gump, who had an intellectual disability and a physical disability. His understanding of the world was like anyone else, it would just take him longer to comprehend it. He also tended to not pick up on social cues, and interpersonal relationships. This put him at a basic understanding of emotion and how to react. Throughout his life, he was picked on for his intellectual disability along with his physical one. In his home town people would throw rocks, and bully him. They would use him for his abilities, such as speed, but still make fun of him. People he met would judge him on how he spoke, and responded to situations both in a positive light, and negative. His mother and Jenny tended to accept him the way he was but as he got old even Jenny became unaccepting for a time.

The only times throughout the movie that he was accepted was when he did something inspirational or that someone could use. Although Mr. Gump was intellectually challenged, he accomplished a lot. He graduated from HS and college, was put on the "All-American" football team. Met the President of the United States multiple times. He became a major athlete through Ping Pong. After serving time in the US Army in Vietnam he was rewarded with the Congressional Medal of honor for risking his life to save his wounded troops, including LT. Dan. He became the owner of a very successful business "The Bubba Gump Shrimping Co." Even

though this is meant to be seen as a positive thing, what is really happening is he is still put on display and objectified for the benefit of non-disabled characters. This also sets an unrealistic standard for people who are intellectually disabled in how they are to be accepted in the real world. Either be something extraordinary or people will make fun of you and violence will befall you.

Fictional text is one thing because it is made up and no one necessarily is being hurt. But its influence is a whole another thing, it could strengthen and even help create stigmas on disability in the real world. Slowly without realizing it, these unconscious biases form within us that lead to how we perceive and react to those with disabilities due to what we learn from texts. Leo, is a man who suffers from a developmental disability known as dwarfism. Throughout his life he dealt with the stares and ridicule from those around him solely based on his physical appearance.

In a documentary following Leo and his soon to be wife Carol, he showed the audience both how he saw the world and how the world saw him and how he was accepted. This was done through the use of a camera that was attached to his head so the audience could see through his height and allow us to see the reactions of non-disabled Leo came in contact with. The documentary followed Leo from one month up until his wedding day. During this time, the only way Leo was accepted by the non-disabled population was by him making people laugh but at his own expense.

To Leo he loved to make people laugh because it made them feel good but also took the negative laughter that would happen anyway, and turn it into something he could control. During this film, Leo's step mother even admitted that when she first met Leo she said to her daughter "I know I raised you to be a princess, but why did you have to choose Snow white". This was a comment to compare Leo to one of the seven dwarfs, which he laughed off yet it was how he was

accepted. So he had to develop this outside persona of “Giant Leo”, his stage name for his comedy act.

Leo says that he likes it to make people laugh because it makes him feel big. But even the day of his wedding, Leo broke down in tears triggered by this idea that he was finally being accepted. That by getting married he finally found acceptance in by a world that he thought would never accept him other than as a joke, or something to laugh at, and that Carol had seen the real him and accepted him.

The director of the film said that Leo used humor as “a tool for inclusion, to break the stigma”. That this was Leo’s way of being accepted in the world. This meant either be laughed at by choice or due to your ability to make others laugh. The director went on to explain that “marriage was the final psychological stability for Leo”, that is was the ultimate form of acceptance. Through this film, he wanted to help break the stigma around disability often created by misconceptions within text. Misconceptions that lay the foundation for how members of the disabled population are accepted by non-disabled and how they accept themselves.

Acceptance is seen three forms when it comes to disabled and text. How the disabled characters accept themselves in the text, how the non-disabled characters accept the disabled characters in texts and how this transfers into how disabled individuals are accepted in the real world. It is dangerous to continue to portray disabled characters as only dealing in extremes within text. It creates and strengthens stigmas that end up limited the acceptance of disabled individuals by non-disabled individuals. It also creates unrealistic standards in which disabled individuals are held to, either be hyper sexualized, monstrous, criminals or as super up beat and inspirational. The director of the film said that, “we as a society need to look beyond the stigmas, to look and see people like Leo as a person”. To see the person not just the disability because by doing that we can

help create a better form of acceptance of individuals with disabilities and allow them to accept themselves as they truly are and as they want to be. Acceptance is a dangerous thing because it could either bring people together or divide and isolate. It all depends on what we say, write, see and do. So it is important to change the narrative on disability and allow for it to grow into a true representation of those with disabilities.

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Lexicon Final

1. Acceptance: This is the way an individual is able to be part of the group or society. In our readings, disabled are viewed as outcasts and are never truly “accepted” for themselves but more as what they can offer (laughing, services, object).
2. Pity: Is the insulting act or looking down on an individual. In our readings, disabled are often “pitied” which is just a way of making them less of an individual.
3. Monstrous: To be atypical in appearance or skill. In our readings, disabled characters are portrayed as “monstrous” in ability or appearance and is usually the reasoning behind any negative action that befalls them.
4. Inspirational: To feel empowered by a person, place or thing, with disability it tends to be used as a way to feel better about their “condition”. That if they do something a non-disabled person can do, it is seen as they overcame a great obstacle.
5. Misunderstood: The individual with disability is often told how to feel, think, act, as if they need to be controlled. They lack basic understanding or are limited through their emotional reactions which causes more confusion.
6. Sexuality: Individuals with disabilities are often hypersexualized, rapist or have no idea what sex is. Always at the two extremes but are never seen as a person with typical sexual needs or desires.
7. Victim: Is often the disabled individual, however is usually labeled to someone that took “affliction” at the hands of the disabled individual. This ends up misleading who is truly being victimized.

8. Animal: To be “beastlike” in the way an individual with disabilities acts, looks or thinks. That people with disabilities are equal to animals which is made to be lower than humans. This justifies actions done to those with disabilities by those without.
9. Violence: Violence often befalls the disabled individual which causes them to return violence and finally be removed with violence. This is often placed upon the individual but cared out by non-disabled.
10. Exploited: Individuals with disabilities are often objectified, and used as a target for hate or an object of inspiration. They are used for their abnormal qualities but not seen as people. This leads to the exploitation of individuals with disabilities, physically, emotional, sexually and morally.

Longmore Reading

What stuck out the most in this reading, “*Why I Burned my book*”, was that I have over looked so much of what Longmore was talking about. Be it from characters in cartoons or movies I have watched, the simple fact that much of what I was seeing was a misrepresentation of individuals with disabilities. Not only was this so with in the fictional world of the movie or TV series but also a type casting of the real-life actors whom have a disability and so are pushed to play role of the “bad guy”.

I agree with Longmore when he says “They tell us that the problem is not as painful or as overwhelming as we fear, that it is manageable, or that it is not really our problem at all, but someone else’s”. To me throughout the rest of the reading this idea stood with me. It is true that through the representations in film or on TV, the seriousness and respect is taken away from the issue of disability.

Not only are those with disabilities being represented as “evil, bad, ugly or full of malleus”, but there is a lack of respect for these people. The way they are being used and displayed puts the inherent idea into the general audience to view the topic of disability in a negative way, yet at the same time to use in their own amusement. This allows for the stigma to grow and those with disabilities to be targeted and face more barriers in the future. I also agree with the fact that it is the duty for disability scholars going forward to address all the past mistakes to build on and create a stronger message for those whom are disabled.

Freedom or Objectification

For this response I had to focus on Treves piece “*The Elephant Man*”. While reading this to be honest, I wasn’t sure how to take it. Was it a story to talk about this “beast like” person and catalog their deformities for further generations? Or, was it to show how not to judge a person by how they look and be more understanding to people. But even in a positive state of mind, trying to give this piece the benefit of the doubt, I couldn’t help feeling that this was written negatively.

From the language used even to the ending, shows this man as an object. Something to look at or take care of, and even with the greatest of intentions he was referred as a project, animal or item through his life. The house that was given, attempts to help and speak, could all be seen as a good thing yet I kept feeling it as pity or away to covet him.

It was hard to read how this individual was treated; put on display, cold and with only a small flame to keep him warm. The way he was talked to “like a dog”. Made to stand up and show off his deformity, to be subjected to the cruelty of people just from being different. Even at the end of his life Merrick was “pathetic and hopeless” because he was trying his hardest to “be normal”, to sleep like everyone else. Instead of true compassion there was always this language of looking down or pity used as if he wasn’t a human but just some “thing/it” that could be used to fill up temporary gaps of boredom for the people around him.

“The Secret Code”

I’m not sure how to feel after this reading other than a bit confused and possibly in the mood to cook. The whole introduction to what I was about to read didn’t make much sense and confused me but less so then what I read after. One of the aspects that was throwing me off was the simple fact that I was unsure who I was reading about; Georges Perce, David Bellos or John Sturrock. It wasn’t until class that I knew who the writer or this piece was and at no pint during my first read and response, did I think he was showing autistic behaviors. Looking back, it makes more sense but still I am convinced there was more to this.

It was written that he was obsessed with the idea of not forgetting; “always puzzled by memory and sometimes obsessed with the fear of forgetting”. This idea of having a need to remember is what stuck with me. In fact, I felt that there was more trying to be said then just an “inventory”.

With this idea in mind I started to look at the reading for anything odd that stood out of place with everything else that is written. Besides a strange diet, there was something that caught my eye. This might have just been simply the way the author chose to write this yet, the capital letters seemed to be more than just a marker to start a new paragraph. There are 19 of them and they read [NFOOOFOFFOOFTSOOFTF], with a possible pattern although this “inventory list” wasn’t long enough to support this theory. Neither the less, F’s and O’s could be seen as start of numeric patter (1,1,2,1,1,1) & (3,1,2,2), With a longer list I wonder if a pattern could truly exist which made me also wonder what Georges might have also been trying to communicate. I still believe there was something else here, if Perce is anything like “*Curious Case of the Dog in The Night*”, I would have loved to read more to see where the code might break.