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Violence

Time and time again, disability scholars come across the word “violence” throughout their studies, as it were a synonym for “disability”. Society as a whole puts violence into a schema to represent disability due to the information it receives through social media, films, novels, and other creative literature. For hundreds of years, people with disabilities have always existed. Unfortunately, it was not until the 20th century where they began to be represented properly in mainstream media.

According to Paul K. Longmore in *Why I Burned My Book*, disability is described as a “deformity of the soul” (Longmore 133). Longmore also argues that physical handicaps are “emblems of evil” and represent a form of violence (Longmore 133). People with disabilities are viewed as envious of the “able-bodied” by typically being represented as villains in popular literature.

Another example of violence is displayed in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In this creative work of fiction, a pronounced soldier named Odysseus begins to observe a “cycloptic” figure along with his shipmates before approaching with extreme caution. While the stranger is away tending his own garden, Odysseus and his shipmates ransack their cabin, eating all of the food and thieving any resource of value. When the stranger comes back to his cabin, he becomes angry and insulted and, in turn, is labeled as a “monster cyclops” that is violent and irrational. This man

now has no opportunity to redeem himself of these boundaries, even though his reaction to a home invasion was valid. Homer describes this man as “a grim loner, dead set in his lawless ways. Here was a piece of work, by god, a monster built like no mortal who ever supped on bread ... a man-mountain rearing head and shoulders over the world.” (Homer 210). This makes the audience lack empathy and side with Odysseus, even when he is branded and left completely blind. Even in today’s society we see examples of a person with a disability is emulated as an “other being” who is dangerous and deserves to be violated (e.g: Deborah Danner in 2016 was an elderly woman with schizophrenia that was fatally shot by police during an episode. The officer was not charged and faced no legal consequences).

In *Of Mice and Men* by George Steinbeck, this hypothesis is also supported. Lennie, one of the main characters, was often described as a “shallow-minded, strong-bodied” individual due to his intellectual disability and larger than average physique. With this label, Lennie’s friend and confidant, George, has taken the role of dismissing and making up for the unintended messages and actions of Lennie. Lennie is also infantilized by George, which is a form of violence. This is expressed especially through speech when George said “I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus Christ, somebody'd shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. No, you stay with me. Your Aunt Clara wouldn't like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead.” (Steinbeck 7). Lennie is constantly asked to keep quiet and stay still as if it were a parent and young child relationship. Steinbeck played into this stereotype by having Lennie accidentally killing small animals in the attempt of caring for them and keeping them warm. George’s immediate response to Lennie’s mistakes is anger and contempt, which typically leads to physical and verbal violence throughout the book.

By learning that there is a woman around town that is very flirtatious, George orders the “innocent” Lennie to stay away from her. In a subtle confrontation, the woman lets Lennie touch her hair, and in a panic, Lennie accidentally kills her in an attempt to quiet her. When Lennie was discovered, he and George fled the town. This leads George to follow through with his “only option” and kill Lennie to avoid presumed trials and tortures in Lennie’s fate. In our society, when violence is performed against a people with a disability, it is viewed as an action that needed to be taken and the perpetrator typically gets away with it. In *The New York Times and Assisted Suicide* by William Peace, light is brought upon those without disabilities claiming that living with a disability is “worse than death”. Peace states “All week I have come back to the flip answer to the question “Should I Help My Patients Die”. The answer is an obvious no. Hastening the death of others is ethically objectionable. How we manage end of life, that is the process of death, speaks volumes about who we are as human beings.”

In *The Miracle Worker*, there are hints of violence. This movie describes the journey of Helen Keller, a deaf and blind activist, learning language. As a child, Keller was described as “difficult to deal with” and was very close to being institutionalized. In one scene, Helen’s teacher, Anne Sullivan, notices and observes the lack of table manners by Keller. This happened because the parents allowed Keller to wander aimlessly and eat off other people’s plates. Anne refuses to let Helen take her food, which results in a tantrum. This communicates to the audience that a child like Helen cannot be controlled and is “unteachable”. The audience also learns that Keller deserves to be violently disciplined and that is the “only way” to get a message to her.

In the *Yellow Wall-Paper*, a woman describes her life as sickly and uncomfortable. She has a husband who is a physician that makes her stay home because she is too “unhealthy” to go

outside and socialize. This is a form of violence in the shape of control. She writes that she hates the mansion and rooms she has been placed in and has no choice but to deal with it. She states “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to my nervous condition” (Gilman 648). Through her writings, it seems like the husband is manipulating her to think her condition is worse than it actually is. This woman is presumed to have postpartum depression, due to her lack of happiness and fatigue. Throughout the story, her husband John treats her more and more like an infant, to the point where she feels no autonomy over her own body. An example of this is when he says “What is it, little girl? ... Don't go walking about like that, you'll get cold” (Gilman 652).

In *Airless Spaces* by Shulamith Firestone, there is a collection of short chapters describing the clinical explanations of different types of “sickness” Firestone notes the stories of different individuals going through their own hardships and the uniqueness of each situation. Firestone makes an attempt to uncover different sides of hospital stay; “Hating the Hospital” versus “Loving the Hospital”. The connection between this work and many works of disability is that none of the individuals mentioned seem to have much autonomy nor control over their direction in life. They are all controlled by an external source, either a person or identity. Because of society’s pressure to exclude and violate those that are disabled or “sick”, the easiest and inexpensive way to do that is through physical, psychological and verbal violence and make them feel like they have no control and have to be told what to do and when/how to do it.

During the March 2018 Reelabilities Film Festival that took place in New York, New York, the film *Leo and Carol* described a story of a “vertically challenged” comedian on his journey to marry his non-disabled fiance. Violence was expressed through the tonality of the

conversation between Leo and Carol when discussing the possibility of conceiving a child. The couple understood that there would be a high chance of the child being born with a physical disability and that made Leo and Carol extremely worried about the life the child would live. This shows the audience that, when thinking to carry a baby through to term, make sure there is nothing “wrong” with the baby. In its entirety, it was an uplifting film and the audience was able to ask the director about the production in person. The director, Alvaro Campos, explained that the main purpose of the film was to show how diverse and complex people with disabilities are and that they are not one-dimensional characters as society believes them to be.

In *Social Structure and Anomie*, Robert K. Merton seeks to explain different types of deviant lifestyles within a society. Anomie, as Merton describes it, is a lack of ethical and just standards and moral guidance to individuals or a group. Merton discusses a particular type of adaptation (way of living) and names it Retreatism. Retreatism occurs when cultural goals and systematic practices have been worked towards, but did not produce success. Retreatists are commonly seen as the homeless, alcoholics, and even people with disabilities. Unfortunately, this adaptation is severely looked down upon as the “burdens to society” and receive little to no respect or care from the society around them. They are also blamed for economic downfalls or as bad role models, making them an easy target.

In conclusion, people with disabilities are often viewed with contempt and violence by the larger and nondisabled society. Mainstream media often ignores the danger that is placed on people with disabilities (ie: *Odyssey*) and indirectly treats them as if they are children that cannot take care of themselves (ie: *Of Mice and Men*, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, *Airless Spaces*).

Disability scholars are working to minimize and erase those harmful stereotypes one day at a time.

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