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Term Paper

Monster: A malformed imaginary creature that is typically large, ugly, and frightening. (Merriam- Webster) Monsters naturally elicit the most acute anxieties in people. For centuries, literature and film have socially created the paradigm of "monstrosity" towards people with disabilities by ascribing monstrous attributes to characters in a story line who also happen to be disabled. This association awakens deeply rooted fears and anxieties that reinforce a negative stereotype towards people with disabilities and has been reflected on in film and literature.

For the most part, film and literature have been good indicators of what the dominating social attitude can be. The portrayals of disability have been negatively influenced through an array of films and literature. Disabilities have been used as means to create justifications for killing off characters in literature as seen in John Steinbeck's *"Of Mice and Men"* and instill terror to an audience throughout a film as seen in the 1962 creation of *"The Miracle Worker"*. Both have presented characters that personify a frightening creature, solidifying the "monster" in those who are disabled.

Disability historian and activist, Paul K. Longmore stated in *"Screening Stereotypes"* that "The physical disabilities typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and gross deformity of the body". (page 135) Although Lennie's disability in *"Of Mice and Men"* does not seem to be a physical one, the novel

focuses and highlights on his physique. From the very beginning, Lennie is depicted as a monster when he is described as being "...shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes with wide, sloping shoulders; he walks heavily..." (*Of Mice and Men*) and is constantly described with animalistic characteristics like "... dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws..." (*Of Mice and Men*) This narrative of Lennie transforms him from the tender, loving man that he is to a monster who imposes a threat to anyone who crosses his path.

When Lennie is attacked in the comfort of his own home, he defends himself and "...the idea that disability results in the loss of self- control. The disabled character thus endangers the rest of society." (*Screening Stereotypes* page 135) making Lennie seem like he went on a monstrous rampage for a natural act that anyone, even those who are not disabled would have had. "This punk sure had it comin' to him. But-Jesus! He ain't hardly got no han left." (*Of Mice and Men*) The novel intended to portray those with developmental disabilities as violent and aggressive towards others. Lennie alongside with other disabled characters in "*Of Mice and Men*" are depicted as less than human because of their cognitive and not typical genetic traits.

The narrative draws so much focus on the "monstrosity" of Lennie's actions that no one including myself tends to ever question Slim's own monstrous

characteristics. Slim is rarely considered a monster, probably because he is not disabled, but his knowledge of how to properly kill someone is far from "normal". "... it is the disability itself and the resultant dangerous behavior that separates and isolates the disabled character from the rest of society." (Screening Stereotypes page 135) The narrative serves to exclude the disabled person from the community, justifying the "...only possible solution is often death." (Screening Stereotypes page 135) by successfully getting the reader to sympathize with George and deeming it necessary to get rid of Lennie.

Similarly to Lennie, Helen was also depicted as a monster in the film "*The Miracle Worker*". Films also mirror the views that prevail in society towards people with disabilities, often illustrating them as monsters. "The subtext of many horror films is fear and loathing of people with disabilities." (Screening Stereotypes page 134) Although "*The Miracle Worker*" was not a horror film, it begins by trying to illustrate Helen as some kind of monster. There is eerie music that played as Helen simply played in the yard which gave it a scary movie feel to the film. Like Lennie, Helen is portrayed as a wild animal "...a pet. Even a house dog you train." (The *Miracle Worker* 55:27) The prolonged dinner scene and violent tooth breaking slap Helen gives her teacher Anne, establishes the foundation to create the stereotype that those with disabilities have monstrous conduct. Helen's outcome was the

opposite of Lennie's, but not before being isolated for what the movie tries to make seem that is for her own good, but I can't help but wonder if it was really for the greater good of those around her.

There has been a tradition in presenting people with disabilities as monsters, but as time passes by, society is slowly progressing to decrease that stereotype. This can be seen in the 1975 film *"One Flew over a Cuckoo's Nest"*. The main character of the movie, Randall McMurphy thinks that entering a mental institution to serve the rest of his two month sentence for statutory rape would be a walk in the park compared to the farm he was in before. Multiple doctors confirm that "He is not crazy, but he is dangerous." (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*), but he meets his helpless vegetable fate while in the ward. In this story line the death of the main character is not justified because the real villain is not the disabled person, but the person one would rely on the most in a mental institution ...Nurse Ratched.

Instead of being the caring nurse that she is supposed to be, Nurse Ratched seeks power and does that through the manipulation of her hospital staff and patients in order to get what she desires. Although she smiles and tries to look charming throughout the film, she is a soulless woman who uses her stature and connections with the outside world to maneuver situations to cover her unprofessionalism and dishonesty. Her power is so destructive throughout the

storyline that her evil influence pushes two patients to give up on life and commit suicide. Under the "care" of Nurse Ratched, McMurphy is sentenced to get lobotomized for sticking up for basic human rights.

Although we definitely don't know whether McMurphy is not diagnosed with a disability or not, he takes on the part to advocate for those in the mental facility and became a leader role model and their voice. He encourages his colleagues to fight back and stand up for themselves while reassuring them that they are not as crazy as the hospital staff makes them seem to be "You're no crazier than the average asshole walkin' around on the street and that's it". (One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest) The narrative finally begins to depict a character as a hero and even a martyr.

After receiving electric shock therapy, McMurphy returns stronger than even becoming a symbol to the men in the ward. There were several times in the film where McMurphy could have escaped to his freedom and put the whole experience in his past, but he showed his loyalty to the men in the ward and some could say that he even sacrificed his freedom and mental stability. After numerous battles, in the end Nurse Ratched wins the war between her and McMurphy when he returns a different man because part of his brain and all of his spirit is taken away from him when he is lobotomized. The dreadful sight of a lifeless McMurphy

is too much for Chief to bare and decides to finally free him from the ward by killing him. This act gives Chief the courage to finally escape the institute using McMurphy's original escape plan and live out the dream that McMurphy tried to do all movie long.

In conclusion, film and literature have aided in the depiction of people with disabilities as monsters through the social construction of informing and influencing the reader's and audience's views. Films and literature are slowly trying to change their portrayal of what the stereotypical monstrous characters should be by decreasing the association with disabilities. I have to admit that it will take immense social and cultural forces to undo and help change the monstrous stereotype, but it is critical to ensure that the proper respect for those people who have disabilities is acknowledged.

#### Works Cited Page

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