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LEH 355: Studies in Disability

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Forced Normalcy in Fiction

When looking at abnormalities, we, the general public view “normal” as what is supposed to happen, or what the society has set and expect the norm to be. Typical changes like, as time passes, growth of the body occurs, being able to walk, talk, see, etc. When someone who is not able to do some or all of those typically set things, they are often labeled as not “normal or typical. We see him or her with a different perspective, sometimes not even as another human being.

In John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men Lennie is perceived and portrayed to be a childlike character with a body of a tough guy. He is very tall, strong and big, but his cognitive skills are not as developed as it is supposed to be for a man of his age. Someone who is supposed to be tough in nature but is not, rather he is childlike and like an animal who isn’t aware of the consequences of his actions. In the film *Miracle Worker* Helen Keller’s condition makes her abnormal from other children of her age. She is blind but has heightened intelligence and is able to grasp things very quickly. Paul Longmore’s “Screening Stereotypes” goes deep into mentioning how people with disabilities are categorized into so many kinds of categories such as criminals, monsters, etc. Society’s actions upon seeing a disabled person also makes separates them into a different category of human beings. For example, when someone sees a disabled person on the street and says something along the lines of “You’re such an inspiration to us,” or “you make us look bad”. This makes the disabled person feel awkward, as if they are not

supposed to wake up and live their day because of their condition. Most of these expressions towards the disabled is often used for self-satisfaction and to make the non-disabled feel good about him or herself. The categorizing people on what is normal and what is escalates the notion of normal and not normal amongst people.

In *Of Mice and Men* the abnormality occurs when Lennie does something wrong, for example when he snaps the rabbit's neck or the mouse and the ultimate crime, the murder of Curley's wife. "He isn't supposed to do that, he's a grown man" (Steinbeck, 17). In this case Lennie's stature completely overshadows his cognitive capacity, and usually people seem to disregard a person's internal conditions if he or she appear typical up front. In Lennie's case, he looks like a very tough guy, but behaves like a child. In societal norm, a big tough guy should also talk rough, act rough and behave roughly as well. So, in Lennie's case when he walks to different places with George, he is seen as a very tough guy who can speak for himself, but as soon as he opens his mouth, his true nature is revealed, which is abnormal for his age. A full-grown man only to have the cognitive capacity of a child or even just an animal. When George was asked why Lennie is like that, his response is very ignorant and comical, he replies saying "He got kicked in the head by a horse when he was a kid. He's awright. Just ain't bright" (Steinbeck, 22). The response of George is also often someone's disability is described. It is described in a laughable way when it is not clearly visible upon looking at the person.

In *Miracle Worker* film, Helen Keller's "abnormality" is portrayed in an extraordinary way. Her scene in the dining table where she breaks things could be described as monstrous which is not what is expected of a "normal" child to do. Helen Keller's whole life can be described as atypical simply because of how she lived her life, a struggle to learn at the beginning and later going on to become a very influential person. Her life also creates some

controversy and left and right sides of opinion where one side of people think of her as very influential, inspiring and the other side making jokes about her disability through popular social mediums.

In Paul K. Longmore's "Screening Stereotypes", the author describes how disabilities are portrayed and connected with "monstrosity", "criminality", etc. These are things someone would not associate with a person who is disabled in some aspect of life. Portrayal of disability often seen as something out of this world. Now we view disability how people used to view people of color a few hundred years ago. There were people and some to this day that think of people of color things like "sub-human" "monkey" "animal" etcetera. Mentality like this is very disgusting and is holding back our society from more forward thinking. Though there has been a significant evolution from the awful thoughts about racism, it is far from the case in terms of disability. People often justify the condition of a disabled person's condition as a punishment and death is their inevitable outcome. Longmore in his essay mentions how these abnormal characters' deaths are necessary because they do not fit with the "normal" and the only solution for society to only function "normally" is to exterminate them." For sympathetic "monsters", death is the tragic but inevitable, necessary, and merciful outcome. For example, Lennie's execution by George, the Beast in *Beauty & the Beast* is eliminated by normalizing him. All these beings that are abnormal or atypical are finished off because the larger society do not see them as typical for their surroundings therefore they don't deserve to stay. Longmore further explains how the literature describes that we are emotional and sympathetic towards these characters, but their end is something that must happen for the good of all. "We can "sympathize" with the mentally retarded Lenny, while avoiding our fears and biases about him, and escape the dilemma of his social accommodation and integration" (Longmore, 136) This is

how we as a society view someone who is not like the majority or the “rest of us”, the abnormalities in a person does not make them a different kind of species but our society looks at someone with a condition and thinks “ Thank god I don’t have it, my friends don’t have it. so, it must be something weird and unusual.” Often not only this thought is used but also people with disabilities are blamed as if it was their choice or a fault of their action to be in such a condition. It is not actually about abnormality but more of the perception and treatment of abnormality by the society that raises an eyebrow.

Lennard Davis in his book *Enforcing Normalcy* further goes and explains how we as a society has set up norm ourselves to calculated against when an individual is judged. In the chapter “Constructing Normalcy” Davis describes the things people set up to hold others and judge the societal norm. He writes

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above-average. (Davis, 3)

he describes how our society ranks all aspects of life and to understand what the disabled body or person is, we first understand the societal norm. “To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of norm, the normal body” (Davis, 3). Davis further describes the concept of norm and its existence among us. We as human being is used to compare ourselves to others, especially if our condition is better than the person being compared to. Often a disabled person is an easy target for this reason. According to Davis, “A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed. After all, people seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society” (Davis, 3). Davis further reinforces my theory about

norms that they are really the creation of the society as a whole rather than one individual.

Usually if an idea is not accepted by the majority or a society, it will not stand and be accepted in that culture or society. The idea of norm or normal is forced by us on ourselves to compare us to others and this creates perspectives, classes, caste, etc. Anyone who is not part of a certain group, or someone who does not bear features to do so is not normal. The concept of races being different and not normal is also similar. Someone from one race is different than another is created by the people of the specific race and anyone outside of that is considered not normal, or usual.

Throughout history, society's view of abnormal or atypical has shifted, and it will continue to do so in the future as the world progresses more. Before, having a different skin color would be considered an abnormality by some people. Now as the world has progressed, fewer people hold such mentalities, and we can only hope that it will progress forward about people with disability, whether it be internally and invisible to the naked eye, or externally like being disfigured and seen as someone "monstrous" or "ugly" It is society's view of a group that constructs how they are treated, and we as the majority of society label people with disability as abnormal or atypical and decide that they are not the same as us. Whether this perception comes to self-satisfy; to feel better about one self or the lack of understanding of the severity of someone's condition and being ignorant, but for now, many of us consider people who are not like us to be abnormal.

Works Cited

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