

Depiction Of Disability In English Literature: A Critique

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ABSTRACT

In English literature, there is a large and obvious difference in how people with disabilities are portrayed. Within the fields of literary and disability studies, the representation of people with disabilities in English literature has been the focus of analysis and debate. A critical analysis of these representations reveals both the strides made in combating stereotypes and the ongoing difficulties in accurately and inclusively portraying disability. While some depictions support preconceptions and stereotypes, others refute them and provide more complex and sympathetic views on disability. The analysis of these representations can offer important new perspectives on how society is coming to view people with disabilities as well as on the ongoing fight for inclusivity and representation in English literature. The author, in the present review paper, aims to critically analyze the portrayal of disability characters in English literature to develop an understanding of 'how' the notion of 'disability' has been perceived and changed over some time.

Keywords: Disability, Depiction, English Literature, Stereotypes, Authenticity and Inclusivity.

Introduction

English literature's portrayal of people with disabilities has changed over time, reflecting cultural views and perceptions of disability. This portrayal has both positive and negative characteristics, according to a critical analysis. In the past, stereotypes have frequently been used to characterize people with disabilities (PWDs), which can reinforce preconceived notions and

unfavourable opinions. Characters with impairments are occasionally portrayed as weak, pitiful, or evil, which contributes to the stigmatization and further marginalization of people with disabilities (Margolis and Shapiro, 1987, March). On the other side, there is a pervasive trend that highlights disabled individuals as role models who overcome their difficulties.

While this might be motivating, it can also set up irrational expectations and minimize the difficulties and complexity that PwDs deal with on a regular basis. There is a dearth of accurate PwD portrayal in many literary works. PwDs' experiences, viewpoints, and voices are frequently ignored or misunderstood (Cormier, 2020). Having tales that appropriately depict the variety and realities of living with a handicap is essential. Some literary works successfully depict the struggles and hardships of PwDs, encouraging readers' compassion and understanding. These tales have the power to dispel prejudice and encourage diversity. The interaction of disability with other facets of identity, such as colour, gender, and sexual orientation, must also be taken into account. Literature that examines these connections helps us comprehend disability and how it affects people's lives on a more complex level (Hagood, 2010).

It is important to note, nevertheless, that a greater range of perspectives and experiences relating to disability are beginning to be presented in modern writing (Hagood, 2010). To achieve truthful portrayals, authors are increasingly drawing on their personal experiences or doing research. This change paves the way for more genuine and inclusive representation. In conclusion, there are both positive and negative aspects to how PwDs are portrayed in English literature. Other works provide accurate depictions, challenge society's beliefs, and foster empathy and understanding, whereas some works reinforce prejudices and misrepresentations. It is essential to keep promoting varied and inclusive narratives that authentically reflect the experiences and voices of people with disabilities going forward.

Understanding 'Why' of Positivistic Portrayal of Disability in Literature

For several reasons, people with disabilities (PwDs) must be portrayed positively in English literature. The diversity of human

experiences is greatly reflected in literature. Literature may advance inclusivity and representation by presenting positive and true portrayals of PwDs. It conveys the idea that people with disabilities are valuable members of society whose stories should be shared (Hagood, 2010). Literature frequently reinforces societal biases and prejudices by perpetuating preconceptions and misunderstandings regarding disabilities. Positive portrayals can dispel these myths and give us a more complex view of disability. It aids in dispelling the myth that helplessness or tragedy is inherent to disability.

Furthermore, writings by PwDs can strengthen their voices and provide firsthand accounts of living with a disability. These stories can shed light, clarify myths, and provide disabled people a platform to talk about their specific experiences. Readers can be motivated and educated about the struggles and accomplishments that people with disabilities encounter by reading positive portrayals of PwDs (Hagood, 2010). These tales can teach important lessons about life, promote empathy, and promote an inclusive and understanding society. The narrative surrounding disability is changing thanks in large part to literature. Positive portrayals can demonstrate that disability is just one facet of a person's identity and should not define their entire story rather than concentrating solely on overcoming hardship (Margolis and Shapiro, 1987). Disability is a broad and diverse category that encompasses a wide range of physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health conditions.

Positive portrayals can draw attention to this diversity and help readers understand the various people's diverse experiences. Literature has the capability to promote disability rights activism and increase public awareness of issues relating to disabilities. Positive portrayals can spark discussions and lead to measures that support PwD accessibility, inclusion, and equal opportunity. It is also important to note that in the context of education, literary representations of PwDs that are positive can be helpful to pupils. It can support varied viewpoints, enhance inclusivity in the curriculum, and foster peer understanding. In the past, literature has also had an impact on how people think and how things change in society. By confronting ableist presumptions and prejudices, positive portrayals of PwDs can help create a society that is more tolerant and inclusive.

In conclusion, it is crucial for advancing inclusivity, dispelling misconceptions, elevating voices, enlightening the public, and promoting the rights and dignity of PwDs that people with disabilities are depicted positively in English literature. It helps build a more understanding, varied, and compassionate society where people with disabilities are accepted and cherished for who they are.

Depiction of Disability in English Literature: A Reflection from Reviews

The way people with disabilities are portrayed in English literature has changed over time as a result of shifting society's attitudes, standards, and perceptions of disability. The analysis of these representations highlights the value of ongoing initiatives to dispel prejudice, promote tolerance, and elevate the voices of PwDs in the literary community. I've critiqued selected literary classics that have prominent characters with impairments in them in this section. These are narrated below:

William Shakespeare - "Richard III"

"Richard III" is a historical play by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written in 1592 (Armstrong, 2006). It is the final installment in Shakespeare's tetralogy of historical plays that also includes "Henry VI, Part 1," "Henry VI, Part 2," and "Henry VI, Part 3." "Richard III" is significant not only for its dramatic power but also because it portrays the rise and fall of a historical figure who reigned as King of England from 1483 to 1485. The play has been a subject of fascination for historians and scholars, particularly concerning the question of Richard III's real-life character and the accuracy of Shakespeare's portrayal (Armstrong, 2006). The play is known for its depiction of the rise and fall of Richard III, a central character who is one of Shakespeare's most memorable and complex villains. One of the most famous portrayals of disability in literature is the character of Richard III. Shakespeare's Richard III is a hunchbacked, scheming, and villainous character. This portrayal reflects historical prejudices against physical disabilities and has been widely studied for its representation of disability in literature (Cauthen, and Wilson, 1955).

Charles Dickens - "A Christmas Carol"

"A Christmas Carol" is a novella written by Charles Dickens and first published in 1843. It is one of Dickens's most beloved and enduring works, celebrated for its exploration of themes like generosity, redemption, and the true spirit of Christmas (Walker, 1983). The novella is a timeless holiday tale and a classic of English literature. It continues to be adapted into stage plays, movies, and television shows. "A Christmas Carol" has had a lasting influence on literature and culture. Readers of various ages and ethnicities continue to find it to be a stirring and touching story, especially around the holiday season. In Dickens' beloved novella, "A Christmas Carol", the character of Tiny Tim is a young boy with a disability, likely a form of paralysis. Tiny Tim's character is used to evoke sympathy and emphasize the importance of generosity and compassion during the holiday season.

Harper Lee - "To Kill a Mockingbird"

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is a novel written by Harper Lee, first published in 1960. It is considered one of the great American novels and has had a profound influence on literature and discussions of race and social justice. The story explores themes of racial discrimination, moral development, and the loss of innocence while taking place in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s. The novel "To Kill a Mockingbird" is praised for its potent storytelling, endearing characters, and treatment of subjects that are still current and provocative. It has inspired significant discussions about race, empathy, and the pursuit of justice. It has been turned into a great movie and is still a mainstay of literature curricula. Harper Lee's novel remains to be a gripping and moving work and has made an enduring impression on American literature. In the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird" of Harper Lee the character of Tom Robinson is a black man with a disabled left arm. His physical disability is significant in the novel, as it plays a role in his false accusation and subsequent trial (Potyk and Swanson, 2014). The portrayal of disability in "To Kill a Mockingbird" is intertwined with themes of racial injustice and social inequality (Sohn, 2017).

Daniel Keyes - "Flowers for Algernon"

"Flowers for Algernon" is a science fiction novel written by Daniel Keyes, originally published as a short story in 1959 (Cline, 2012)

and later expanded into a novel in 1966. The narrative is renowned for its examination of intelligence, empathy, and the moral ramifications of scientific research. It has been lauded for its provocative narrative, influence on conversations about human awareness, and impact on how people with intellectual disabilities are treated. "Flowers for Algernon" has received much praise for its examination of human consciousness and the moral conundrums raised by technological advancement. It is a thought-provoking and emotionally moving book. The format of the story collection of journal entries allows readers to closely follow Charlie Gordon's intellectual and personal journey, making for an intensely compelling and lasting narrative (Cline, 2012). This science fiction novel explores the life of Charlie Gordon, a mentally disabled man who undergoes an experimental surgery to increase his intelligence (Celikel, 2020). The story raises complex ethical questions about the treatment of individuals with intellectual disabilities and the impact of altering one's disability status (Sanders, 2012).

Mark Haddon - "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time"

"The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" is a novel written by Mark Haddon, first published in 2003 (Haller, 2004). The novel is lauded for its original storytelling approach and for its portrayal of a young kid who struggles with behavioral and cognitive issues. It is frequently labeled as a mystery and a coming-of-age story. The novel "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon is praised for its sympathetic depiction of neurodiversity, examination of personal development, and emphasis on the need of understanding (Haller, 2004). The book has been adapted into a successful stage play and has resonated with readers and audiences alike, promoting a greater awareness and acceptance of individuals with cognitive differences (Ray, 2013). This novel is narrated by Christopher, a 15-year-old boy with Asperger's syndrome. The story offers readers a unique perspective into the mind of someone with a developmental disability and how he navigates the challenges of everyday life.

Louise Fitzhugh - "Harriet the Spy"

"Harriet the Spy" is a children's novel written by American author Louise Fitzhugh. It was first published in 1964 and has since

become a classic of children's literature. The book is praised for its portrayal of a young, bright protagonist and its examination of issues like friendship, self-expression, and identity. A well-known and enduring piece of children's literature, "Harriet the Spy" is praised for its captivating lead character and its examination of subjects that appeal to young readers. The book has influenced numerous adaptations, including a feature film and a television series, and it is still regarded as a significant and beloved tale in the world of children's literature. Harriet's nanny, Ole Golly, is blind, and her disability is portrayed in a positive light. Ole Golly serves as a mentor to Harriet and offers valuable life lessons and wisdom throughout the novel. This character illustrates a positive representation of disability in literature.

Christy Brown - "My Left Foot"

Christy Brown's autobiography, "My Left Foot," is a compelling and inspirational memoir published in 1954. Christy Brown was an Irish writer and artist who had cerebral palsy, a condition that severely limited his physical abilities. The book is celebrated for its powerful narrative of triumph over physical adversity and the creative spirit that perseveres in the face of profound challenges. "My Left Foot," Christy Brown's autobiography, is a profound examination of the power of creativity and self-expression and a monument to the resilience of the human spirit. His incredible life has been made more widely known thanks to the popularity of the same-named film adaptation of his narrative, which has inspired readers all over the world. Christy Brown is an Irish author and painter with cerebral palsy, and "My Left Foot" is her autobiography. The book shows Brown's tenacity and artistic abilities while offering a personal glimpse into the life of someone who has a serious physical impairment (Rosenbaum, 2022).

Alice Walker - "The Color Purple"

"The Color Purple" is a novel written by American author Alice Walker, first published in 1982. It is a highly regarded literary masterpiece that has significantly influenced conversations on race, gender, and identity. The book is praised for its compelling account of the early 20th-century African American experience in the rural South and its examination of issues including resiliency, love, and personal development. The discussion of significant

social and cultural concerns in "The Color Purple" garnered praise from critics. It was given the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and eventually turned into a popular movie and stage show. The novel remains a significant work in the canon of African American literature and a powerful examination of the human experience. Celie, the central character in "The Color Purple," experiences significant adversity and abuse, and she is emotionally and physically scarred. The novel explores her journey to self-empowerment and healing, highlighting the impact of trauma and emotional disabilities (Budi and Widyastuti, 2017).

Conclusion

The way that people with disabilities are portrayed in English literature has changed over time as a result of shifting cultural attitudes. Disability was frequently depicted in older literature in a sad or pitying light. Disability-related characters were often portrayed as weak, pitiful, or even evil. They were frequently cast in supporting roles or made to serve as sympathy figures. Additionally, in certain works, people with disabilities are portrayed as inspiring. Characters with impairments triumph through difficulties and reach greatness, acting as models of tenacity and fortitude. While these stories can be motivating, they can also reinforce the notion that people with disabilities must constantly demonstrate their value or get above their obstacles to be respected. In literature, there are several clichés and tropes related to disability. These stereotypes may include the "supercrip" who excels despite his or her condition, the "tragic cripple" who is only known for their impairment, or the "magical disabled person" who exhibits superhuman talents. The intricacy and distinctiveness of disabled characters may be constrained by these representations.

Characters with impairments are increasingly being portrayed as independent and powerful people in more contemporary literature. These individuals are depicted as having free will, making independent decisions, and making significant contributions to society. With this strategy, stereotypes in society are contested, and portrayals of disability are made more realistic and inclusive. The interaction of disability with other facets of identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, is frequently explored in modern literature. This enables a more nuanced comprehension

of the experiences and difficulties faced by people with disabilities who are members of various marginalized groups. The promotion of "own voices" narratives, or literature created by authors with disabilities, is becoming more popular. By utilizing the authors' own lived experiences, these publications offer genuine and nuanced viewpoints on disability. This strategy aids in dispelling preconceptions and offering more truthful depictions of disability. To better reflect the many perspectives, abilities, and difficulties of people with disabilities, contemporary writing is making an effort to be more inclusive and authentic.

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