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The Role of the Disabled in Literature

As society grows to become more inclusive of people of different ethnicities, sexualites and abilities, the media will have an ever increasing role in the appropriate portrayal of these groups. Often times what we learn about different types of people is from how they are portrayed on screen and in books. These portrayals often influence how people are treated by society. Lennard J. Davis in “Constructing Normalcy”*,* explains how the disabled people are often marginalized by society because they stray from the mainstream and ideal view of the body. Davis futher’s this point by emphasizing the representation of disabled people in literature. According to Davis, in addition to already being poorly portrayed within literature, the rhetoric, symbolism and characters regarding the disabled are all typically used to help bolster an idea of normality. John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is no different, where Steinbeck constantly contrasts the actions, dreams, and words of George Milton to Lennie Smalls, who is mentally handicapped. When viewing Steinbeck’s work through the lens of Davis, it is clear to see that the interactions between characters George and Lennie are used to help portray the idea that disabled characters in literature are only used to help bolster the relatable qualities of the central character.

When viewing the main character Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* from Davis’s perspective, it is clear that Lennie breaks the conventional role for the token disabled character to be an unimportant side character. Davis states that “It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities”(Davis, 21).This stems from the idea that most of the time the disabled characters are merely plot tools to help strengthen the main characters connection to the audience. However, this thought is contradicted by Lennie’s role in the story, who is one of the main characters in *Of Mice and Men,* while being severely handicapped. It can be reasonably argued that all of the major plotlines are a result of Lennie’s actions, which occur because of his mental disability. In fact,for most of the story George is simply reacting and responding to things Lennie does or says. “George went on furiously. ‘I got you! You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get. Jus’ keep me shovin’ all over the country all the time...You do bad things and I got to get you out’”(Steinbeck, 6). Here we see that George’s life is being subjected to dodging the fallout from Lennie’s actions, which clearly shows Lennie’s great contribution to the work of the novel. “If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented”(Davis, 21). Lennie’s character would clearly contradict Davis’ claim about main characters having disabilities because he is clearly very important to the plot of the story, so much so that the entire plot revolves around his actions.

However, Davis’ idea that the disabled characters are only used to help make the normal character more relatable does apply to the relationship between George and Lennie. Davis’ contention that “the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normatively encourages us to identify with him or her”(Davis, 21) is well applied throughout *Of Mice and Men*. George is essentially the definition of the average person that Davis describes. There is nothing spectacular about George at all.

The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely (Steinbeck, 2).

George’s normalcy are revealed through is his relationship to Lennie. Most of the description given to George is really only in reference to something that would later be opposed by Lennie’s description. Like Davis mentions, George’s description becomes more nomoral by being juxtaposed with Lennie’s bear-like description, thus George even more relatable to the reader. Compared to Lennie, George is of shorter stature. George is main deviation from normalcy is his relationship with Lennie, which coincides with Davis’ point about disabled characters only being used to strengthen the main character.

Furthermore, The loyalty, pain and frustration George shows to Lennie helps make him a more relatable character. These feelings are often felt by those who take care of people with mental handicaps. In fact, the unique relationship that George and Lennie have only exists because Lennie is disabled. Otherwise, they would be normal people living the average life. George will often make remarks towards Lennie like “You’d drink out of a gutter if you was thirsty”(Steinbeck, 3). which show his clear frustration with Lennie. Furthermore, this demonstrates how George believes that Lennie would be unable to survive without him, and reemphasizes how hopeless Lennie would be without George. This clearly coincides with the idea Davis makes, “the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normatively encourages us to identify with him or her”(Davis, 21). Moreover, this one sided friendship that George has with Lennie is what reveals his good character to the audience, and makes him so understandable. “‘No,’ said George. ‘No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now. That’s a thing I want ya to know’”(Steinbeck, 52). When George finally kills Lennie, the audience is forced to empathize with him at a time when he was forced to make a very hard decision for his good and the good of others.

Davis’ original contention within *Constructing Normalcy* that novels with disabled characters tend to use the disabled to emphasize the normality and universalness of the main character to make him more relatable to the audience is exemplified very well through both George Milton and Lenny Smalls. Although both of these characters can be considered central to the story, George is made more relatable through his one sided friendship with Lennie. The friendship that they have is how the audience comes to understand George as a person. George is forced to put up with all of Lennie’s actions and words, often times leaving him frustrated and hopeless. However, despite all the grief, George still cares for Lennie, even when it isn’t in his best interest, which is what makes his character so powerful.

Works Cited

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