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Stereotypes of Disabled in Society: A Call for Change

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Writing Process

The purpose of this assignment was to research and write in an academic discipline. Students were asked to conduct academic research and to produce an argument about a “super.” The argument required that one joins an academic conversation, as he or she practiced the research and writing conventions expected of a member of an academic discipline or community. To get started, I began thinking about a topic—something that was not only important to me, but also important to society. I looked at the links provided to me by my professor that gave background information on numerous superheroes. After analyzing the characters, I decided on two disabled superheroes: Professor X and the Silver Scorpion—both of which are paraplegics. My topic was then formed, as I thought about how people view the disabled community and how these disabled superheroes confronted the stereotypes people have about paraplegics and other disabled persons. I decided to show in my argumentative essay the way that film, literature, and other popular texts attempt to combat disability stereotypes. I was required to use at least three scholarly sources and one primary source to support my argument, so I looked at scholarly articles, the popular films, *X-Men* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*, and the comic book, *Silver Scorpion*, all of which highlighted the way society treats disabled persons and the stereotypes that exist about them. With this information, I was able to successfully argue that film and literature are beginning to incorporate more people with disabilities into the plot—emphasizing their value and worth in society, and ultimately, changing viewers’ and readers’ perspectives. Three steps were taken in order to form this argumentative essay: a topic proposal, an annotated bibliography, and finally, the essay. I revised my work with peer-review, as well as a conference with my professor.

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Stereotypes of Disabled in Society: A Call for Change*

Within every society lies a deep characteristic of human behavior—one that unfortunately persists because it is ignored or deemed as a part of everyday life. This characteristic is stereotyping, and its effects can be tremendous. The popular superheroes, Professor X from the sci-fi thriller *X-Men*, and the Silver Scorpion from the comic *Silver Scorpion*, are just two examples of a counter to the stereotypes society has perceived about the disabled community, such as being inferior, pitiful, inept, or incompetent. How can these men, both who are paraplegic, have the strength and authority to be superheroes, one may ask? This essay will show how film and literature attempt to counter the stereotypes of what a superhero should be like and be capable of; it emphasizes that persons with disabilities are heroes and valued members of society. Addressing stereotypes associated with minority groups, such as persons with disabilities, is essential because, currently, this is an area of neglect in both disability studies and superhero studies. Thus, my research considers whether film and literature ultimately serve as a way to change viewers' perspectives and expose them to a new way of thinking about people with disabilities: as even bigger heroes than the stereotypical superheroes they grow up idolizing.

According to Juliana Claassens, stereotypes and “misguided perceptions” in society are “one of the most daunting challenges” that disabled people have to face (169). She discusses the way the disabled body is usually represented as a “freakish spectacle” (Thomson, as quoted in

Claassens 170). Disabled or differently abled people also are considered “misfits in society—not fully human” (Claassens 170). All of these examples are the stereotypes that need to be confronted. People do not question what they believe because society tells them that is the way it is supposed to be, and that is not right. As Claassens notes in her conclusion, “realizing our own vulnerability and accepting disability as part of human life” can change perspectives (179). Acceptance of disability is so important because many people have the idea that disabled people are an “abnormality” of human life; however, this is beginning to be addressed.

One of the ways we can realize and accept disabilities as a natural part of human life is through literature and other popular texts. Literature is an important part of people’s lives—they are always learning from what they see and read. What happens when the sources they are getting that information from are skewed, though? Is one person really inferior to another? Is it possible that society is not seeing the world with open eyes? So often, people are blind to the effects they have on other groups that are not “normal” when they stereotype them. Literature is beginning to combat these stereotypes and include more disabled characters in children’s books and comics. One such comic is the *Silver Scorpion*. As it was stated in the introduction page of the *Silver Scorpion*, this comic book captures the ideas of 13 disabled Syrian students and 10 American students who came together to discuss “strategies for improving the rights and freedom of the disabled” and to develop a story about a boy, the Silver Scorpion, who is not only the main character, but who is also a disabled superhero. The Silver Scorpion, also known as Bashir, seems to be ungrateful and arrogant before he becomes disabled. In Chapter 1, Bashir sits down in a wheelchair he finds in a junkyard and makes fun of paraplegics to his friend when he states, “Hey, check me out, Kamal! I’m a helpless cripple.” Almost immediately after his “joke,” Bashir loses his best friend and his legs in an explosion—ultimately putting him in a wheelchair

for the rest of his life (*Silver Scorpion* Ch. 1). He has to learn to cope with this, and readers can see the struggles he faces, such as being made fun of, being called a “freak” by kids at school, feeling ashamed, and having to take pity from others (Ch. 2). By exposing readers to these hardships, they can learn that one has to be a very strong person to live with a disability—they can see how calling someone a “freak” can have tremendous effects on his self-esteem. Shortly after the explosion that takes Bashir’s legs, a man named Tarek, the previous Silver Scorpion teaches Bashir that his “disability should never hold [him] back,” and he also tells him that “what makes a real hero comes from within, and [he] should be proud of who [he] is regardless of [his] disability” (Ch. 3). Tarek transforms Bashir into a superhero and gives him his power and responsibility, which is something many people do not expect someone with a disability to have. This plot is an example of how comics are attempting to confront disability discrimination and place value into the lives of people with disabilities—in this case, by making Bashir a superhero. The stereotype that disabled people are helpless is confronted because Bashir is saving other people; he is not dependent and unable to carry out responsibilities. Bashir symbolizes the process of a disabled person overcoming his own disability through his transformation into the Silver Scorpion.

Another example of how literature works to confront stereotypes is through children’s books. A few example of the books, varying greatly in the content, are titled, *Autism through a Sister’s Eyes*, *I’m Deaf and It’s Okay*, *Loving Ben*, and *Don’t Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*. These books incorporate people with disabilities into the story, which helps youth communicate, learn about, and identify with the disabled community (Dev 197). The books range from categories like autism, deafness, orthopedic impairment, physical disabilities, and many more, and they help people to start discussion about the “inclusion [and] adaptation...for

individuals with disabilities (Dev 197). Over years of study, the authors have concluded that “children’s literature portraying characters with disabilities accurately helps to promote awareness about diversity in schools” (Dev 210). This is so important because it is a demonstration of literature that not only teaches adults, but also teaches children not to take part in stereotyping disabled people. It shows that these books are increasing awareness, and they are “appealing to youth of all ages and reflect a variety of backgrounds and characteristics,” which is vital at a young age because children will be exposed to healthy attitudes and characteristics to strive for, such as inclusion and acceptance of others who may be different than them (Dev 197). Children are not born with these stereotypes; they are taught these beliefs from the society they grow up in, so teaching equality and changing perspectives before stereotypes start to affect them is essential.

Perhaps an even more influential form of media working to change society’s perspectives about the disabled community is film. In the popular movie titled *X-Men*, Professor X, a man who is in a wheelchair because of an accident in his past, plays a very important role. Shortly into the plot, the audience can get a feel for his character. Professor X is a superhero who is capable of telepathy, taking over people’s minds and making people lose their memory. He wants equality between the mutants and the humans, which can be symbolic of the equality between the disabled community and “normal” people. At one point in the movie, Professor X attends a government meeting where the Senator states, “there are mutants among us” (*X-Men*). This little statement ultimately symbolizes the discrimination that people show toward “abnormal” people, at least “abnormal” according to how others view them. Professor X, although disabled, is a respected authority figure in society. He is valued, and people seem to overlook the fact that he is in a wheelchair. This ignorance of physical differences by the rest of

the characters is a subtle yet powerful example of how film is attempting to address disability stereotypes such as helplessness, inferiority, and incompetence. *X-Men* is working on the language of disability studies by attempting to show that, although Professor X is disabled and may not have the strengths and abilities that others do, he has remarkable strengths in other ways. This is an exceptional way of opening society's eyes to seeing disabled people as "differently abled" and as important members of society.

In the sequel to *X-Men*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Professor X's role in society can be analyzed once again. One scene shows Professor X teaching a class of "mutant" students, and they are all very respectful towards him—they clearly value his teachings (*X-Men: The Last Stand*). Later on in the plot at Professor X's funeral, Storm, a former student of Professor X, gives a speech about him stating that he was a "leader, a teacher, and a friend" (*X-Men: The Last Stand*). These examples are evidence of Professor X's relevance in the world. As previously stated, *X-Men* addresses the stereotypes of disabled people, and it gives a clear message to the audience: not all disabled people are incapable of having an important role in society, nor do they need to be pitied or rendered inept. Professor X is clearly skilled and capable of much more than the average human, and that can help to change perspectives.

On a more realistic note, Claassens states that people have a "fascination with physical beauty and perfection," which is why this "cult of normalcy" envelops society and entertainment today (175). Often, our society does not see real lives of disabled people in media, and that skews many people's perspectives. In an article titled, "Dispelling Stereotypes: Promoting Disability Equality through Film," Diane Schwartz examines surveys that were given to people who attended film sessions to argue that film "helps viewers see individuals with disabilities as people first" (841). The films were all about real lives of people with disabilities trying to live

normal lives (Schwartz 841). At the end of the article, Schwartz concluded that “film...provided an entertaining and meaningful way to generate discussion and change attitudes about disabilities” (847). This evidence, ranging from quotes from families whose perspectives were changed to surveys of people who watched the films, reinforce the idea that film can change people’s perspectives. Many of the people surveyed said that the films were “very powerful” and thought that more people needed to see the films (Schwartz 847). Schwartz’s article, then, highlights the unfortunate fact that disability is not displayed enough in media, but the films that do are working to confront disability stereotypes and change the way people view the disabled community (Schwartz 841). According to Schwartz, people “rely on visual images,” and the “importance of realism is compelling” (841). Therefore, viewers can understand why film is so significant to people’s lives and see it as a powerful medium to get the message to people.

Whether we agree with them or not, stereotypes are a part of every society, but what many people tend to ignore is the tremendous effects they have on people of minority groups, such as people with disabilities. The common stereotypes placed on the disabled community can be perceived as inferiority, vulnerability, incompetency, and appearing inept or pitiful. Because these stereotypes exist, society tends to rank disabled people at its bottom, thus almost diminishing their value of life; however, this is what needs to change. Film and literature serve to alter viewers’ perspectives on disability stereotypes and expose them to a new way of thinking about people with disabilities. By incorporating disabled superheroes into entertainment, the audience can see the value of each person—regardless of his or her differences—and recognize him or her as an important member of society. This is so essential because viewers and readers of all ages can get a chance, firsthand, to see a different light shed on the disabled community, which has been an area of neglect for disability studies and superhero studies alike. Children’s

books, comic books, and film that confront disability discrimination offer a way to visualize equality and exercise the inclusion and acceptance of others who may differ from what is considered “normal.” The fact that authors and filmmakers are attempting to appeal to multiple generations and to break these disability stereotypes is a significant step towards improving society—one that hopefully continues to grow.

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