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**Representations of Disability in *Of Mice and Men* and
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Avoiding Handicapism in the Classroom**

A Thesis Presented

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In this thesis, I examine two novels that feature characters with disabilities and that are often taught in secondary English classes. These texts will be analyzed through a disability studies perspective - a form of analysis that is not often taught in schools. The disability studies perspective involves looking at disability in a critical light and examining the social, cultural, and political ramifications of assumptions that are made about those considered to be "disabled" by the able-bodied majority. Using this lens, I will explore the assumptions about disability that seem to be represented in these works through their use of language, and how teachers can approach disability in literature in a way that will encourage their students to be conscious of harmful depictions of people with disabilities and to be aware of their own use of language and how it contributes to the many constructions of disability.

Dedication

For Steven, who forever changed the way I view disability.

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I would like to acknowledge Professor Patricia Dunn for first opening my eyes to the issue of disability studies language and rhetoric and how it pertains to the issues of teaching in a modern day classroom.

Introduction

Literature is a window into the world of the “Other”: others that are like us or unlike us, others going through the same experiences or experiences we can never dream of, and others experiencing life through the same kind of body, or a different type of body altogether. Stories about people who are different from ourselves have a special appeal and provide a unique opportunity to introduce us into a world of which we are not part, such as a reader with sight reading the story of a blind individual. Since there are many disabilities that make life slightly different for those experiencing particular conditions, disability literature piques the interest of many non-disabled readers who are interested in the lives of someone whose body or mind is different from their own. Though many readers read books simply to enjoy a story, disability literature must be read with an awareness of how characters with disabilities are portrayed or used in the story, the social and cultural context of the story, and what the author appears to be saying about disabilities or people who live with them.

To understand the effect of literature featuring characters with disabilities on a reader, it is important to examine the text from a disability studies perspective in order to understand what disability means for a disabled individual, and what it means for society as a whole. Disability studies is an academic discipline that investigates how disability is represented in media, and how disability is defined by various social and cultural factors. Instead of seeing what people with disabilities cannot do, the field of disability studies looks at society to see how society does not meet the needs of those with disabilities and thus makes them “disabled.” To make the construction of disability more vivid, disability theorists suggest thinking of a person in a wheelchair: The individual is still able to move around by using the wheelchair, but once he or she is met with stairs, the person is disabled in that they cannot climb them. The disability

studies perspective would assert that although the person has an impairment, what really disables the person is the stairs.

Disability studies extends beyond the bounds of an academic discipline and can also be used as a lens to understand literature. Any text that includes a character with disability or language that refers to disability can be examined through a disability studies lens. This lens asks the reader to look at how the character with the disability is represented, and what assumptions are being made regarding the individual and regarding people with disabilities in general. What is most important in reading a text through the lens of disability studies is that one must consider the repercussions of the writing: With what will readers walk away at the end of the story, and how will this affect their perspective towards people with disabilities in real life? It is here that we consider the profound influence that literature has on readers, and in particular, the young readers who are still forming their ideas about the world around them and about things that they may not see in their own daily lives, but get to see and experience through forms of popular media, such as literature.

This thesis will examine *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, two key classroom texts that revolve around characters with disabilities and are frequently found in the English Language Arts curriculum in middle schools and high schools across the United States. By placing these texts on required reading lists and statewide selected literature lists, local and state education departments assert the importance of these books that prominently feature characters with intellectual, mental, or emotional disabilities, but it is important that this novella and novel be read closely and actively so that students are not left with uncomfortable or even frightening pictures of those with disabilities.

It is first necessary that students recognize the act of staring in both reading and in real life and the harmful effect that staring has on both the person being stared at and the starrer. Reading into the world of another can be considered a form of staring, which Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to in her essay, “The Politics of Staring,” as a particularly interested form of looking that “registers difference” between the person looking and the person who is being looked at (56). Readers who fall under Garland-Thomson’s definition of staring are interested in gaining temporary entrance into the world of the “other” through literature, but intend to keep that distance as opposed to forming a connection with the person on the other side of the text, whether it is the author or a character. As a result, reading allows people to stare in a way that is not as offensive as actually staring at someone on the street, but that lets people more covertly satisfy their interest in the differences of others, like visible disabilities such as a prosthetic limb or an eye peering in another direction, or invisible disabilities, where a person may have the physical appearance of a non-disabled person, but has an intellectual, mental, emotional, or developmental disability. People’s views of disability are intricate and complicated, and all begin with staring to register that difference. As Garland-Thomson puts it:

As a culture, we are at once obsessed with and intensely conflicted about the disabled body. We fear, deify, disavow, avoid, abstract, revere, conceal, and reconstruct disability – perhaps because it is one of the most universal, fundamental of human experiences. After all, we will all become disabled if we live long enough. (57)

Garland-Thomson emphasizes that the phenomenon of disability is not so strange at all since it affects – or will affect – the majority of the population (some disability rights activists refer to the non-disabled as the “temporarily able-bodied,” to remind them of the aging and illness that eventually disables older people), but still people become fixated on it to the point of staring in public, or staring privately through photos and literature. This “stare” can be found throughout

numerous disciplines and power differentials in the form of a more metaphorical “gaze,” such as “the male gaze” in feminist theory and the “colonial gaze” in postcolonial theory. In each case, this “gaze” or stare is attributed to a harmful normalizing point of view, but the gaze is all the more evident in disability studies since many disabilities are literally visible and noticeable.

The issue of staring takes center stage in the secondary English classroom, where many students read texts such as *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, both of which show characters who appear typical, but who harbor invisible disabilities that draw attention to the characters because the characters’ speech or behavior is considered to be outside of the norm by their fellow characters and even by the author’s tone. The non-disabled staring reader, who is usually a young person who may or may not have prior experiences and knowledge of people with disabilities, may potentially create a power differential over the character with a disability at which the starrer is staring. This power differential becomes dangerous when the starrer begins to stereotype characters and people based on what is known about their disability in particular. Though not all readers are prone to stereotyping based on fictional texts, it is essential to address the implications that literature can have on readers who stare and do not make meaningful connections between the text and real life, but instead use a fictional story to forward their misconstructions of disability. Writes Frank Bowe in

Handicapping America:

Yet one central, tragically wrong assumption seems to pervade most of these attitudes: that disabled people are different from us more than they are like us, that their disabilities somehow set them apart from the rest of us.

Our literature and mass media, from children’s books to Shakespeare, from *Frankenstein* to *Psycho*, reinforce this view, achieving the more power because our direct, personal contact with actual people who have disabilities is so limited by architectural and transportation barriers and other obstacles to interaction. (109)

Bowe gets to the heart of the issue that many teachers face: How to teach young people that people with disabilities are people first, and that they are not something strange or different. Teachers must shatter the view that pervades literature and media, even if it means unteaching what students had learned as children through books, movies, and through others who have the same incorrect assumptions of people with disabilities.

The barriers which Bowe mentions, such as physical and social barriers that keep people with disabilities from fully engaging in all aspects of society, enable a wide spectrum of misconstructions of disability to flourish, including the notions that people with disabilities are ignorant, pitiful, or even dangerous. If a reader initially believes that people with disabilities pose a threat or are not deserving of the same rights of non-disabled individuals, there is a greater likelihood that he or she will be affected by literature that casts characters with disabilities in a harmful light, and thus be encouraged to see people with disabilities as dangerous and unpredictable. In the classroom, students should not just learn the general plots and themes of works by renowned authors; they must also learn how to critique what they read before taking the messages that they read to heart. At face value, a novel may seem detrimental to the overall image of people with disabilities, but if students are taught to be critical readers instead of starers, they can examine the story and characters with which they are presented to glean a view of disability at a certain point in our own history and culture. This snapshot can then help young people gain a better understanding of how people with disabilities were treated in our own not-so-distant past.

The concept of some readers as starers creates an unsteady ground for teachers to work on when facilitating a novel. Though the disabled body or individual as a whole is “at once the to-be-looked at and the not-to-be-looked-at,” says Garland-Thomson, readers will undoubtedly

focus on the characters with disabilities as something new and different (57). It then becomes the teacher's responsibility to guide students to think critically about how the character is represented. Garland-Thomson makes a point to state that "in representing disability in modernity, we have made the familiar seem strange, the human seem inhuman, the pervasive seem exceptional" (57). Her message to readers and starers alike is the same: representations, either through images or writing, have the ability to spin any perspective the creator would like, but the subjects are still humans, just like the reader and starer. Certainly not all texts portray characters with disabilities as strange or inhuman, but in the case of literature that perpetuates harmful disability rhetoric, it is imperative to read with a discerning eye to realize how characters with disabilities are portrayed and attempt to explain why this phenomenon occurs.

Though texts like Steinbeck's and Kesey's provide an opportunity for such staring to occur, disability literature also allows for the character with disabilities to give the non-disabled characters and the reader greater understanding of the world through a body different than the socially accepted norm, which could help sculpt the reader's perspective toward people with disabilities. As one will see, the characters that have disabilities in both texts are not flat in the least, but are dynamic, experienced, and insightful, which offers thought-provoking material for young able-bodied readers. Not all readers are necessarily starers, for if non-disabled readers are not looking to create a power differential over the author or character with a disability, real connections can be made, and the staring turns into a look intended for meaningful understanding. A meaningful connection can be formed by questioning the motives of each of the characters, including the motives of the character with disabilities, as well as examining the author's possible purpose for how he depicts that character, as opposed to reading the text at surface value for the basic plot. Readers who are not starers read literature with a critical

awareness, and consider how literature may be feeding into various stereotypes or models of disability, such as how disability can be viewed from a purely medical point of view as a condition to be cured or fixed, or how certain characters with disabilities are stereotyped and found in literature throughout history. By being aware of these harmful motifs, students will in turn be less likely to perpetuate them in their understanding of literature and in their real life experiences with people with disabilities.

For readers to transform into meaningful connectors instead of basic starers, it is the teacher's responsibility to bridge the gap between young readers and the subject matter so that readers can learn to actively read with a critical eye towards language and meaning. In *English Journal*, Howard Margolis and Arthur Shapiro make the claim that "because books, especially classics, are powerful tools by which civilization perpetuates its values, English teachers have a unique opportunity and responsibility to counter the injustice suffered by truly disabled persons caused by such negative stereotypical portrayals" (18). All literature that is taught in the school curriculum has the potential to have a profound effect on young people because of the level of regard at which it is held by society by being on required reading lists. If William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are on a student's required reading list, he or she will likely believe that these texts are important to social values if these texts are being taught districtwide – or even statewide – so whatever these authors present as truth will likely carry significant weight in the mind of the young reader.

Since literature taught in schools carries so much weight, it is all the more vital that teachers take the opportunity to explore handicapism – a theory defined by disability studies experts Robert Bogdan and Douglas Biklen as "a set of assumptions and practices that promote the differential and unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical,

mental, or behavioral differences,” (15). Those who have handicapist beliefs see only a disability and fail to see the person as a whole. This can be manifested in avoiding people with disabilities and believing that the lives of those with disabilities are worth less than the lives of the non-disabled. In society, handicapism is prevalent in how people with disabilities are excluded from common activities. They are excluded from facilities that do not accommodate wheelchairs or other assistive devices, businesses that refuse to hire employees with disabilities, and they are completely missing from billboards, posters, and other marketing efforts that bombard consumers on a daily basis. Though it is not the role of the English teacher to teach disability studies exclusively, teachers can teach about the inherent dangers of handicapism as it occurs in literature by asking students to critically examine the purpose that the character’s disability serves, as well as what the author seems to be implying about disabilities. Handicapism is equally as dangerous as any other derogatory belief system, including racism and sexism, and, if left undiscussed, it may continue to exclude people with disabilities from the public light. Also, handicapism, like other harmful social constructs, is not merely an issue of policy, but an issue of language, and it is within the English teacher’s purview to help students analyze language use and to change students’ own language use for the better.

Handicapism includes several models of disability which each explain disability through different popular schools of thought. The most common school of thought is the medical model, which looks at disability as the result of a person’s physical and mental limitations due to a specific disorder or condition. The medical model is disconnected from the social and geographical environments, and thus ignores significant factors of disability, such as how counters at stores may be too high for shorter people to reach, thus putting the handicap on the shorter person (Michigan Disability Rights Coalition). This model also includes the belief that

people with disability can be “fixed” or “cured” using medicine, science, and technology – which operates under the harmful assumption that these individuals are “broken” in the first place. As one will see later, the medical model is analyzed and turned on its head in Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* when hospital staff continuously medicate the patients in the mental ward and force them to take part in uncomfortable therapy sessions with the belief that this will make them healthy and normal, even though the characters are never seen as actually benefitting from this treatment.

Another common model of viewing disability is the tragedy/charity model, in which people view those with disabilities as pitiable, helpless, and in dire need of the help of able-bodied people (Michigan Disability Rights Coalition). This belief makes those with disabilities second-class citizens, as they are seen as incapable of normal functions and thus should be looked down upon as sad, tragic individuals. Characters in both stories are seen pitying the characters with disabilities, sometimes looking at them as if they are children and stripping them of all rights as a result. In Steinbeck’s novella, Lennie, the main character with an intellectual disability, is cared for by his friend, George, which immediately puts him in a subordinate role. George encourages the tragedy/charity model amongst his fellow ranch hands, as he believes that it is better for them to see him as pitiable and childlike than to see him through the medical model as mentally unwell and fodder for institutionalization. Kesey’s novel, on the other hand, fights this model, as the male patients fight to retain their dignity in a hospital setting.

One model that is exploited by some segments of society is the freak model, in which people see those with disabilities as “freaks” or bizarre people who are meant to be stared at and put as part of a show for all to see. This is supported by some circus and “freakshow” businesses, and though some individuals with disabilities do make money from performing in

such shows, overall this model permits the staring at and marginalizing of those with disabilities, and thus makes it more difficult for people with those same disabilities to gain access into normal roles in society. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* offers some characters that are seen as deranged and frightening, but Kesey attempts to tear down the screen of “freakishness” to show that they too are human beings who are deserving of the same care and dignity as any other individual. Unless an individual’s disability is put into context, such as what Kesey attempts to accomplish in his novel, it can easily be misconstrued and viewed as something separate from the individual as opposed to being part of someone’s everyday life. Furthermore, those who are exposed to the freak model may see people with disabilities as shocking and horrifying, and thus encourage discrimination and forced institutionalization.

Disability studies experts suggest that the ideal model for teachers to engage their students in is the social model, which provides a more expansive view of disability that does not blame the individual for their condition, but instead looks outward to see how social constructs limit their ability to be active in society. In the Statement of Principles on the *Disability Studies Quarterly* website, disability theorists Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Paul Longmore state:

Disability Studies utilizes a multidisciplinary approach to analyze the intricate interactions among social, cultural, political, economic, and physiological variables. It seeks neither to jettison, nor to embrace medical paradigms of disability, but to transcend them. It explains personal experiences of disability, not simply in terms of the functioning of bodies that operate in nonstandard ways, but by locating those differences within the larger context of the cultural milieus that shape disability experiences.

In essence, the social model takes multiple factors into account, and claims that disability is created by society when one is limited by what society offers them, such as a blind person who is perfectly able to operate an elevator if the buttons for each floor have braille writing on them, but that same individual would have immense difficulty selecting their floor without braille, and

would thus be disabled. It is with the social model in mind that teachers are called upon to explain the more problematic models of disability that are shown in literature and to put forth this social model so that students see that disability is not inherent in the individual, but in a social environment that does not strive to include the individual to their fullest capacity through universal accommodations that will benefit people with and without disabilities alike.

Through a critical study of *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, this thesis strives to enlighten both readers and teachers and to provoke them to be more aware of characters with disabilities and how they are represented in literature, and to further think of how this can affect the young readers who are required to read these stories. By being mindful of these depictions and the assumptions that the author makes, teachers can then guide students to evaluate the stereotypes and models that are employed before the students absorb them into their perspective of people with disabilities.

Of Mice and Men: To Be Intellectually Disabled in a Non-Disabled World

Set in the early 20th century, John Steinbeck's famous pastoral novella, *Of Mice and Men*, tells the story of two migrant ranch hands, George and Lennie, who are on the run after Lennie, an adult man with an intellectual disability, grabs a woman's dress and is assumed to have tried to attack the woman. In the story, Lennie continues to have trouble fitting in and being accepted by the other men on the ranch, so he is guided and cared for by his friend George, who only wants to make a decent living for himself and Lennie. The story is told by a third person narrator who appears to be partial towards George in that the narrator describes Lennie as George's opposite and uses negative descriptions of Lennie that appear to subscribe to the

harmful models of disability. While reading the text, it is important to notice the bias that exists in the narrator's voice even though the narrator is not physically present in the story.

This novella is commonly found on middle school and high school required reading lists, and in states that have adopted the Common Core Standards, it can be specifically found on the ninth grade selected reading list (Engage NY). Putting this text on the list of recommended literature for the ninth grade curriculum signifies that *Of Mice and Men* is valued so much that state education departments deem it worthy of being taught almost universally, but for what is the novella being valued? Thousands of schoolchildren read this text each year, which is a huge step for disability literature, as it brings disability to the forefront of a curriculum that largely lacks significant characters with disabilities, but including novels that focus on characters with disabilities also builds a loaded curriculum that forces the teacher to consider the effects the texts may have on young people. If teachers fail to address the major issue of handicapism and the various models of disability, students may only walk away with a superficial understanding of the story and a lasting impression of how the characters with disabilities were portrayed, which is often a very negative image laced with prejudice. If disability-driven literature is taught correctly and teachers invite their students to look at the multiple facets of the depictions of characters with disabilities, these readers can then close the book with a greater understanding of how disability was viewed in a realistic fictional snapshot of history.

The snapshot provided by Steinbeck immediately begins by contrasting Lennie with his non-disabled friend, George, who serves as a marker of the "norm":

The first man was small and quick, dark of face with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with 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 and only moved because the heavy hands were pendula (Steinbeck 2).

Lennie's shapelessness lends itself to Steinbeck's representation of his disability. Lennie is vague and nebulous, much like what his mind is assumed to be. Steinbeck also depicts him as animal-like, as the author compares him to a bear and objects, and is later compares him to a horse, which further dehumanizes his character. Martin Halliwell, author of *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*, comments that by comparing Lennie to animals and objects, Steinbeck "[reinforces] his lack of freewill and rationality" (144). In contrast, by being compared to animals, Lennie can also be seen as having "natural nobility," says Halliwell, as though he has a stronger connection to nature and the earth than the non-disabled characters. If his "natural nobility" is the case, it does not seem to win him much respect, as George talks down to Lennie and demeans him for his sloppy behavior.

Furthermore, the narrator depicts Lennie walking behind George, even in open areas, which continues to illustrate his obedience and dependence on George. Instead of being seen as subhuman, some critics see this – as well as Lennie's simple speech and need of guidance – as childlike behavior, such as literary critic Paul McCarthy, who wrote that Lennie is "more like an overgrown retarded boy capable of hope and love" (63). McCarthy seems to be attempting to bridge the divide and portray individuals with disabilities in a more positive light, but he instead piles on a new stereotype that is vastly different from the "moron as menace" or "natural nobility" – that of the "eternal child" (Stevenson, Hart, & Gernsbacher). Adults with developmental disabilities have long been viewed as childlike objects of pity who incur condescension from other adults without disabilities. As an offshoot of the tragedy/charity model, the eternal child stereotype can limit adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities in society, as the non-disabled majority often feels that these individuals are not capable of things

beyond what a child can do or what a child is allowed to do. According to Stevenson, Hart, and Gersnbacher, the “eternal child” stereotype has also been found to “wreak havoc in arenas ranging from employment discrimination to forced sterilizations,” as adults who are considered by others to be children are often deemed unfit to ever become parents. In the case of Lennie, he is depicted as childlike not only in how he defers to George, but also in how he mimics his behavior, such as imitating his movements when they lie down after their walk into Weed, or how he takes George’s lead without question.

This view lends itself to the tragedy/charity model of disability, which is one of the primary views of disability by the non-disabled, and which is often utilized for gathering sympathy for groups that raise money for those with disabilities, such as Jerry Lewis’ support of the Muscular Dystrophy Association with Jerry’s Kids. Jerry’s Kids was a charity program in which Lewis frequently rolled out pitiable-looking children in wheelchairs to garner donations. Though many felt that Lewis was doing a great service for those with MD, his condescension and pity was more harmful than helpful. The true catalyst that caused Lewis to be a target for many disability rights advocates was an article that he wrote for *Parade* magazine, in which he referred to life with MD as “being a half a person,” which was taken as a great insult to more than just the MD community. Lennie is similarly depicted by the author as not having the abilities of a “complete” person, as he relies on George for guidance in every matter of life. Steinbeck’s use of the “eternal child” further fuels this condescending view that many non-disabled people have of adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities. This stereotype has been a point of contention in the disability rights movement, as policymakers still argue over the rights of people with intellectual disabilities when it comes to major life decisions, such as allowing them to live alone, get married, or even have children. Teachers must teach for the

future of society, and depictions of characters with intellectual disabilities can have a profound impact on the perspectives of young readers and affect them later on in life when it may be those former young readers who decide on public policies.

Though he defers to George, Lennie is also on the receiving end of George's short-temper, as he snaps at Lennie for his forgetfulness and repeatedly calls him a "crazy bastard" (4). Besides a person with an intellectual or developmental disability being referred to by the loaded adjective "crazy," "bastard" also carries significance in the world of disability studies. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, "bastard" can be defined as "an illegitimate child" or "something that is spurious, irregular, inferior, or of questionable origin." In the case of Lennie, this can be seen as a slight to how he was conceived, or a flat-out insult regarding his disability, which George uses to say that Lennie is inferior to himself. George's use of language follows the medical model of disability, as he appears to believe that Lennie's disability is inherent in his mental limitations and that his condition is "incurable" (Michigan Disability Rights Coalition). Since George sees that there is little to be done about Lennie being a "crazy bastard," he instead tries to temporarily normalize him.

George recognizes the discrimination that Lennie faces, and he states it bluntly in the first chapter that if the boss "finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we're set" (Steinbeck 6). George assumes that Lennie cannot learn to speak to a potential boss in a manner befitting a typical ranch worker, so Lennie is forced into silence so that his intellectual disability is less evident. As readers, we understand that George blames Lennie for their past record of jobs, as they have previously lost work when Lennie's behaviors have complicated their relationships with their boss. During the Great Depression when the novella takes place, many people believed that those with intellectual or

developmental disabilities, such as Lennie, were a danger to society, and held firm to the harmful “moron as menace” stereotype (Margolis & Shapiro 18). Though Lennie is far from a menace, Steinbeck utilizes this stereotype to make Lennie menacing through a simple yet deadly flaw: his inability to recognize his own strength.

In the classroom, students must take the time to realize that the “moron as menace” stereotype was a popular view during the time when Steinbeck penned this novella, and they should question what this view meant for people with intellectual disabilities at this time in history. To open up the conversation, teachers should ask students to evaluate the fairness of considering those with intellectual disabilities to be menaces, and to also look at statistics of crime perpetrated by people with disabilities during this period, as well as the crimes that have been perpetrated against people with disabilities.

What is perhaps most important to consider is that *Of Mice and Men* may be the only text that students will read that has a major character with a disability in a curricular setting, which puts a tremendous weight on Steinbeck’s depiction of Lennie as the primary image of a disabled character. Though it is not Steinbeck’s responsibility as an author to cast Lennie in a positive or negative light, it is the teacher’s task to unpack Steinbeck’s novella and representations of Lennie. In addition, the questions that a teacher does or does not ask may profoundly shape students’ views of disability, for better or for worse. For example, some language lessons ask students to identify which animals Lennie is compared to in the text, but the lessons do not ask students to analyze the meaning of such metaphors in a disability studies context. Students can also get a wider view of Lennie’s character through questions regarding his relationships with others, and how different characters see Lennie. By providing multiple perspectives of Lennie and asking students to read with an objective and critical eye, teachers can further engage

students with the issues that are spurred by the story and create a dialogue that would not exist if questions were kept to a superficial reading of the plot and characters.

To prevent Lennie from being branded as a “menace,” George tries to protect him by casting off certain assumptions that he anticipates from other ranch workers, and normalizes him by telling the other ranch hands that Lennie was kicked in the head by a horse when he was a child, as though that makes his disability more noble and acceptable. George also tries to dispel the same assumptions to which he appears to subscribe. Though George calls Lennie “crazy,” he later shows his true colors when he defends Lennie when Slim refers to him as a “cuckoo,” and George retorts, “He’s dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy. An I ain’t so bright neither” (39). Here, he is attempting to level the playing field for Lennie, but Lennie is still labeled as the “dumb” one. George also supports the “eternal child” stereotype when he introduces Lennie to others, such as when Slim says that he is “jes’ like a kid,” and George concurs, “There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he’s so strong” (Steinbeck 43). This helps their situation in that comparing Lennie to a child is meant to make the other characters more comfortable around Lennie. If he is compared to something innocent and not perceived as a threat, their fears of him being a “moron as menace” can be assuaged. The eternal child stereotype is also prevalent in society today, as people who are uncomfortable around those with disabilities may look for such an excuse to treat them differently in order to feel that they understand these people better.

Though Slim sees Lennie as a child, he is also the character that treats Lennie with the most respect. Soon after meeting Lennie, he tells George “He’s a nice fella... Guy don’t need no sense to be a nice fella” (Steinbeck 40). This moment in the text offers the opportunity for a jumping-off point in teaching with a disability studies lens, as students can see which characters

subscribe to this point of view, and which ones do not. Slim opens the door of what in the discourses of disability studies is commonly referred to as “normalcy” to include those with disabilities, as he reminds readers that what is truly important is the quality of one’s ethical character.

The larger question posed by Steinbeck at the end of the novel revolves around Lennie’s death. George’s choice to shoot Lennie instead of stand up for him or to continue to live on the run from society speaks volumes about his shift in perspective regarding Lennie’s disability. One way to understand George’s choice is to see it as a form of euthanasia to save others and prevent Lennie from causing further damage to society, meaning that George saw Lennie as a menace even though Lennie did not intend to menace anyone. For this reason, numerous public school districts across the country have banned the novella, claiming that it “promotes euthanasia,” making it the sixth most banned book in United States history (Associated Press). When teaching a banned book such as *Of Mice and Men*, the teacher is essentially a gatekeeper, and must guide students as they enter the world of the novella. For students to grasp the implications of disability in the novel, the teacher must bring up the controversial topic of euthanasia and the debate that is caused by George’s choice to kill Lennie, even though Lennie could be seen as a perfectly healthy human being. Though it cannot be said whether the novel definitively promotes euthanasia or condemns it, the sheer ambiguity of the ending provides an excellent conversation point for teachers to discuss disability rights with students, and to share parallel non-fiction texts about the controversy of euthanasia so that students can learn more about the topic through real-world examples and case studies.

Though many might assume that young readers should be able to differentiate fact from fiction in terms of stereotyping and discrimination, it has been found that the harmful depictions

of those with disabilities go beyond the page. Studies have found that reading texts that echo negative sentiments regarding disability that are accurate for the time they were written have a powerful effect on today's readers by encouraging detrimental stereotypes of disabilities. In a study of forty-eight students in three ninth-grade classes regarding their perceptions of disability after reading *Of Mice and Men*, Heather Garrison, Associate Professor of Special Education at Fordham University, found that their responses “[resounded] with the eugenic sentiments of the era in which it was written.” In particular, Garrison found that students’ answers “used several specific linguistic techniques to indicate a variety of primarily negative perceptions that frequently reflected the medical, charity, and freak models of disability that are explored in disability studies scholarship.” This should raise the concern of teachers who are using the text in their curriculum in that it shows that students are not being asked to look for stereotypes and models of disability in their reading – and if they are noticing these stereotypes, they are accepting them instead of critically analyzing them to see what they accomplish as part of the plot. By using the critical lens of disability, students can walk away from this novella with far more than an understanding of the basic plot and a few negative images of disability; Students can close the text with an understanding of a time in history for people with disabilities, and how others understood or made assumptions regarding their abilities and thus treated them as second-class citizens. By examining Steinbeck’s use of language, such as when George refers to Lennie as a “crazy bastard” or a “fool” students will also be invited to be more aware of their own use of language and not further propagate negative models of disability such as the students in Garrison’s study (6, 9).

Reading *Of Mice and Men* in the classroom from a disability studies perspective likely will open the doors to issues of pejorative language that goes beyond “crazy” and “fool,” which

gives the teacher the opportunity to have a profound impact on the students' perspectives of their own speech. In the case of Steinbeck's novella, it is likely that students may refer to Lennie as "a retard" or "retarded" which is both a controversial noun and an adjective that is presently considered to be derogatory and politically incorrect. The term, though rooted in the formerly acceptable "mental retardation," degrades the individual and all people with intellectual disabilities and revokes their personhood. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "retard" has been used as an insult for a person who is seen as "mentally or physically deficient, stupid, or incompetent" since the late 1960s, and is synonymous with "moron" and "idiot." Since "retard" remains as part of the average teenager's vocabulary, having a character that may evoke this term provides a starting point for teachers to open up a discussion about pejorative language and to educate students on how language can perpetuate harmful stereotypes. In addition, this conversation can spur students to think critically of the notions of normality that are conveyed in literature, and in their everyday lives. Since normalcy is an issue that many young people deal with on a daily basis in their efforts to "fit in" or be seen as part of a group, students will certainly relate to normalcy in terms of disabilities and see how much more challenging the "normal" group is to join for people who are excluded due to no fault of their own.

A language analysis can also enlighten students as to how disability studies is not just a study of social behavior and policy, but a study of language and discourse as well, and for young people to also see the effect that language has on their perception of people and ideas.

According to an article in *Rhetoric Review*, "students should learn to understand and control the power/politics of naming – especially of professional jargon – to learn to think critically about how naming directs/deflects their attention" (Coe 373-374). By being aware of the author's use of language as well of the students' own use of language, students themselves can decode the

author's attitudes and also see what the students' own language says about them. For example, Jeff Roberts, a professor in the communication department at George Mason University, in his study of the rhetorical structure of disability that "selecting the term "idiot" or "retard" in an effort to describe a person with a disability reflects an individual's conception and reality of another while simultaneously deflecting other realities such as personhood itself in the other" (56). This deflection is what teachers must hone in on and prevent, since it is the propagation of such harmful language and ideas that allows for people with disabilities to continue to be repressed in society.

By pushing students to consider how they speak about disabilities, young readers will think about their language use in a way that they have likely never explored. Researchers in the Department of Educational Studies at Ghent University in Belgium recently found that such a rhetorical perspective "takes into account that students trained in specific disciplines cannot avoid using a specific terminology and, therefore, they cannot avoid labelling even when they are sensitive towards one's language use," but students will be able to see the shift in language and the idea of "political correctness" and be able to form their own understanding of language and its role in the realm of disabilities (Rutton, Roets, Soetart, & Roose 635).

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Where Abnormal is the New Normal

Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, was published in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in 1962, and he sets the ground for the challenges his characters will face by focusing on the popular yet controversial idea central to this movement: The deinstitutionalization of psychiatric facilities. Unlike *Of Mice and Men*, Kesey's narrative

presents people with disabilities as a norm, since the majority of the characters are patients of a mental ward and thus are presumed to have mental disabilities, among other conditions. These patients are based on actual people that Kesey met while working the graveyard shift in a psychiatric ward at a Veteran's Administration Hospital, which leads the reader to question Kesey's connection to his fictional tale, and what he says about the patients with whom he worked (Whitley and Goodwin). It is certainly evident to the reader that by placing the story in a setting where disability is essentially run of the mill, Kesey erases the minority complex that is often associated with disability, where the person with the condition is usually isolated and cast out from the group. Instead it is normal behavior that is cast out of the novel, and atypical behavior that is embraced, thus creating a story that is somewhat chaotic for the average reader.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the reader is introduced to Randle Patrick (R.P.) McMurphy, a rebellious laborer who is trying to escape work and prison by being diagnosed as mentally insane so that he may live out his days in a psychiatric ward. Though most people would view a psychiatric ward as a repressive site where "crazy" people are kept away from the "normal" people in society, McMurphy is unconventional and sees this as a welcome break from a society that does not respond well to his strong personality and unruly behavior. Surprisingly, his story is told from the point of view of Chief Bromden, a fellow patient at the ward with a mental disability who often is taken aback by a "fog," in which he loses consciousness – which may cause the reader to question his reliability as a narrator. Though his narration ebbs and flows into a dreamlike state, the voice of Chief Bromden forces the reader to consider what it means to be disabled, especially since his narration reveals that he is far more observant and insightful than he lets off to the other characters.

The novel – which has also become a play and feature film – firstly promotes a highly critical view of the medical model of disability. The dozens of patients in the psychiatric ward are repeatedly dosed with various sedatives, tranquilizers, anti-psychotics, and any other pill that can be given which the nurses claim will “make them better.” The patients take the medicine without argument, but when McMurphy joins the group, he takes a stand against the meds, and causes the other patients to think about their treatment and if it actually does make them better. Near the end of the story, one of McMurphy’s fellow patients, Harding, dumps handfuls of pill over the other characters and depicts their supposed need for medications as being similar to quelling a resistance at war:

We shall all of us be shot at dawn. One hundred cc’s apiece. Miss Ratched shall line us all against the wall, where we’ll face the terrible maw of a muzzle-loading shotgun which she has loaded with Miltowns! Thorazines! Librium! Stelazines! And with a wave of her sword, blooie! Tranquilize all of us completely out of existence” (304).

Harding’s martial metaphor profoundly influences the other patients who hear, as he has finally vocalized what many of them had been thinking – that the medicine was not used to make them better, but to punish them and to repress them, and to make them more easy to manipulate. Likewise, Nurse Ratched’s final move against McMurphy’s insubordinate behavior is to order his lobotomy to finally ruin him. When he is brought back to the ward post-operation, the other patients have trouble believing it is actually him, but when they realize it must be the real R.P. McMurphy, they make the unspoken decision to smother him to death with a pillow to take him out of his assumed misery. The men agree it is best for McMurphy, and the Chief has no reservations or regrets, and immediately escapes through a window to give himself the new start that McMurphy urged him to take all along.

It is no surprise that murder – whether it seem as assisted suicide or a mercy killing – appears in books featuring characters with disability. Assisted suicide is also a hotly debated topic in the world of disability studies. A few years ago, *Disability Studies Quarterly* featured an article by Harold Braswell, a PhD candidate at Emory University, regarding the creation of a disability studies theory of “end-of-life autonomy.” In his theory, Braswell proposes that it is “an individual's legally protected and medically enacted decision to die in response to a serious incurable medical condition,” but critics are divided over whether people with disabilities should have the right to end their own lives or the choice be only reserved for the terminally ill. Though Braswell argues the rights of those with disabilities to choose to end their own life, there is a gray area of individuals who may not be able to make an educated decision for themselves. In the case of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Of Mice and Men*, neither of the primary characters with disabilities chose to end their own life, but it is understood by these narrators, who are evidently influenced by ableist views, that they are better off that way and should thus be killed by their non-disabled fellow characters. In Steinbeck's novella, George pulls the trigger to keep Lennie (and potentially himself) from being killed by an angry mob that has formed and to keep him from harming anyone else, but it is unknown if Lennie could have had a different future. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Chief Bromden believes there is no future at all for McMurphy, who is essentially braindead, and subsequently kills him before escaping the hospital. These scenes are both incredibly powerful and riveting to read, but they leave the reader on a bit of a cliffhanger, wondering how the non-disabled characters who killed their counterparts with disabilities will cope with their actions. This may send the wrong message to impressionable young readers, who could close the book thinking that people with disabilities are better off dead than alive. As stated earlier, non-fiction texts and background information on

euthanasia, assisted suicide, and mercy killing are useful in elaborating on this complicated issue that is presented in both texts. Though it is a contentious subject, students will get a wider range of perspectives from the disability community, as not all people with disabilities feel the same way about having autonomy when choosing one's own death or choosing when to end the life of another.

Another prominent theme in Kesey's novel is that of repressed sexuality. Many of the male patients are removed from having a sexual identity, and any casual remark that may be taken as sexual is cause for immediate discipline. The first character to be seen as sexually repressed is Harding, who is harangued during group therapy when Nurse Ratched insists on the group discussing his issues with his wife, which she implies are rooted in his belief that she seeks sexual attention from other men, even though Harding adamantly believes his wife is having an affair. The other men are also completely unsexed, and McMurphy's entrance into their society creates a shot of testosterone that seems foreign, yet familiar to the men. Michael Boardman writes in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* that Nurse Ratched's behavior towards the men in denying their sexual nature can be considered sexual abuse because depriving one of sexual integrity can be seen as especially demeaning and cruel, as the men are not allowed to express the sexual aspect of human nature, and if they do express it, such as Billy Bibbitt's sexual encounter with Candy, they are then shamed (179). After spending the night with Candy, Billy is satisfied and proud, but his smile vanishes quickly when Nurse Ratched reprimands him and informs him that she must report the incident to his mother. Billy immediately breaks down and tells the nurse that he was forced to sleep with Candy, to which she responds soothingly, "It's all right, Billy. It's all right. No one else is going to harm you" (316). Nurse Ratched immediately equates sexual activity with "harm," and reports on Billy to his mother as though he were a child,

thus revoking his masculinity and causing him to be ashamed of his sexuality, and to commit his final act of cutting his own throat due to his conflicting feelings about expressing his sexuality. Billy's suicide provides a talking point for teachers to address the construct of people with disabilities not being capable of sexual relationships, and to further describe the effects of stereotypes of sexuality and disability and to suppress the proliferation of such oppressive views and treatment.

The issue of individuals with disabilities being seen as desexed, unsexed, or completely asexual is a view that still plagues society today. Though sexuality is seen as a taboo topic, the sexuality of people with disability is considered even more taboo. According to an article in *Rehabilitation Psychology*, research has found that people with disabilities are often perceived as asexual. Furthermore, those with physical disabilities in a romantic relationship were looked upon more favorably than those with psychiatric disabilities who were involved in a relationship, thus showing that there is a greater stigma surrounding those with psychiatric disabilities than those with physical disabilities when it comes to sexuality. This study reveals how society chooses to stigmatize people with different kinds of disability based on assumptions of what those individuals can and cannot do (Garrison). To see how the patients in the novel are treated by the nurses as though they are completely devoid of sexuality shows how this stereotype has cemented a place in society, so much so that it can be carried out without question in Kesey's mental hospital microcosm. Depending on how *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is read, it can either invite criticism of this view, or cement it further. To return to the idea of readers as "starers," one can see the starers (or the readers that read for a superficial understanding of the text) are the audience that is apt to take these views at face value, whereas active readers will be

more likely to see how Kesey calls for criticism through his depictions of the patients as human beings who are innately sexual.

Beyond sexual repression, further issues revolving around disability arise during Nurse Ratched's group therapy, which presents itself as a form of "staring" that is so severe, it appears that the nurses are preying upon the men's weaknesses. The narrator, the Chief, tells explains the purpose of the group therapy sessions to the reader as the following:

I've heard that theory of the Therapeutic Community enough times to repeat it forwards and backwards – how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society is what decides who sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up. (49)

In the novel, Nurse Ratched, besides being the antagonist to her patients, is a starrer: she wants all of the men to have their flaws thrown out in the open for her to see, thus making the patients more vulnerable to her rule. The other patients are not that interested in hearing what the others have to say at group therapy, as is shown by their inability to follow one patient's story without being distracted or stating extraneous ideas.

Kesey speaks to the truth of how such starers operate through McMurphy's realization that the group therapy sessions are just a "pecking party," where the men are chickens, and when one reveals a spot of blood or weakness, the other nurses and men then turn on them and rip them to shreds (57). Though the men do not want to attack one another, they often bully one another out of sheer frustration of being brought together to discuss such personal subject matter. Nurse Ratched, then, is the lead hen who "pecks that first peck" and encourages the other men to join in making the patient being discussed uncomfortable (58). This is an accurate depiction of how bullying works in any situation, including when it comes to those with disabilities. If people are insecure regarding their disability, they are then open to being "pecked" to death by

others. Many students can take this image further and relate to either being part of or witnessing a sort of “pecking party,” and teachers can take this opportunity to discuss how societies allow for this, how group dynamics are affected, and how this scene is any different from bullying that occurs among non-disabled people.

To avoid being “pecked” by Nurse Ratched, the men on the ward typically fall in line and –with the exception of McMurphy – no one ever questions the woman they call “Big Nurse.” Though the patients are considered to have mental disabilities, the handicapism they experience can best be described as “saneism,” which is defined as “discrimination against those who have been given a psychiatric diagnosis and/or who are perceived to be “mentally ill” (Wolframe). This can also be perceived as a form of sane privilege that is given to Nurse Ratched, her underlings, and the other people who work at the hospital. Saneism grants license to characters like Nurse Ratched who are seen as “sane” – meaning that they have no diagnosis of mental illness or disorder, nor are they perceived to be “mentally ill” – to allow for the oppression of psychiatrized people while inside the mental healthcare system, so much so that the patients begin to believe that they must defer to the “Big Nurse” due to their assumed mental states, and remain in the hospital voluntarily. Ironically, Nurse Ratched’s methods and morals appear insane through the eyes of Chief Bromden and the other patients who see that she manipulates them through medicine, shock therapy, and threats that terrify them to their core.

Both *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Of Mice and Men* come together in a depiction how the non-disabled characters handle the characters with disabilities (or perceived disabilities) in accordance with the medical model of disability. Many able-bodied people see disability and look for a way to “fix” or “cure” the individual, but in both texts, these attempts fail. In the case of Steinbeck’s novella, Lennie cannot be fixed, and even when George tries to

get him to behave normally, Lennie inevitably gives away his intellectual disability through his language and actions. One can argue that in murdering Lennie, George could have been trying to “fix” him, because George may have believed that Lennie was better off dead than living the life that he had.

From a disability studies perspective, this point of view would be incredibly dangerous, but is still worth considering in the scheme of the text, and in understanding opposing arguments regarding the rights of people with disabilities. George truly thinks he is doing the right thing, but the reader is left without knowing who he did it for: Did George kill Lennie to benefit Lennie, or did George pull the trigger to benefit himself? There were certainly other ways that Lennie’s actions could have been handled, but the reader must consider why Steinbeck chose his open-ended final scene, and what that does both for the story as a standalone novella and as a piece of disabilities literature. Similarly, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the nurse attempts to cure the patients through invasive group therapy and then through more violent means: electro-shock therapy and lobotomies. This approach to disability as a deficit that needs to be fixed is not just harmful, but it blames the individual with the disability for being broken or sick. The disability rights movement instead strives to put forth the social model, which acknowledges disability as a part of people’s day to day lives, and works to make society more accommodating, inclusive, and disability-friendly.

Pedagogical Approaches to Disability Literature in the Classroom

When looking to understand the point of view of another, teachers often ask their students to put themselves in the shoes of the other person, but in the case of disability literature,

this may not be the best approach. It is immeasurably difficult to imagine the true nature of living with a life-altering condition, and to try to do a demonstration of a disability often follows a slippery slope of an unintentionally offensive nature. People with disabilities in the classroom should not become the object of a lesson; instead, students should be encouraged to reflect on how their society benefits particular groups, which in this case means examining the power balance within the fictional texts between those with disabilities and those without disabilities.

In their article, “Countering Negative Images of Disability in Classical Literature,” Margolis and Shapiro suggest two questions that teachers can use to avoid harmful staring and to spark conversation regarding disability in literature. Their first question asks, “Are the characters portrayed as people, or as literary devices?” (19). Since students often look at realistic fiction as a way to gain insight into potential motives and analysis of human behaviors, they often see characters as people. As a result, students may be compelled to see characters with disabilities as true people when the author may have intended them to simply forward the plot of the story or to be a stock character, such as the view of Billy Bibbitt as the bumbling stutterer whom McMurphy takes under his wing in an effort to help Billy develop independence. Lennie also fills a stock character role as the large “moron as menace,” but readers may take away more than just his character, and see other large people with disabilities as ignorant and potentially dangerous. Though the teacher may be asking students to not look at them as people, they should not downplay the role of the character, but instead ask students to reimagine the author’s purpose for the character and for their disability.

Margolis and Shapiro also encourage teachers to ask their students, “Is the person with a disability shown interacting in ways that are mutually beneficial?” (20). This question invokes the tragedy/charity model of disability, as the question refers to how characters with disabilities

are often “receivers” in their relationships with able-bodied counterparts. The “giver-receiver” dynamic often functions to show the maturation of an able-bodied character into a more thoughtful or charitable person. The prime example of this dynamic is Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*, as Ebenezer Scrooge’s behavior towards the physically disabled boy serves as a moral thermometer. It is not until he pities the boy and is charitable that he is seen as having matured and becomes a good person in the realm of the text. In the case of *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie is certainly a receiver, as he relies on the kindness of George to be taken care of and guided through life. Margolis and Shapiro add:

Although persons with disabilities have a legal right to live in the least restrictive environments and with nondisabled persons on an equal basis, such interactions are hardly equal when the able-bodied are uniformly perceived as *givers* and those with disabilities as *receivers*. (20)

The giver-receiver dynamic also appears in Kesey’s novel between the patients and the nurses. Before the arrival of McMurphy, the patients were content with being on the receiving end of Nurse Ratched’s so-called “care,” but when McMurphy shakes up the ward, the men begin to open their eyes and see how they have been stripped of their dignity, and so they start to assert themselves in areas of their lives and psychiatric care. The giver-receiver model is further encouraged in society, as readers will likely be familiar with fundraising for different diseases, cancers, and other conditions and disabilities. Though charitable efforts often prove to be incredibly beneficial towards raising much-needed research funds and funds to care for individuals who may be strapped for money due to their conditions, such charity must be marketed in a way in which the individuals with disabilities are not seen as weak, feeble receivers of the care and money of able-bodied people who can function normally in society.

Conclusion

Literature has the potential to have a great impact on the minds of young people, which is evident in how thousands of novels have been banned throughout history, including these aforementioned works, due to the perceived negative influence the stories may have on readers. Though *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are loaded with controversial subject matter and divisive depictions of people with disabilities, they remain seminal texts that have defining value as disability literature. Teachers must not shy away from the opportunity for the profound teachable moments that arise while reading books that portray particular kinds of people in a negative light. As Margolis and Shapiro write, "The issue is never that of banning or censoring but of discussing and explaining symbolism so that damaging messages are negated" (21). If a reader can potentially view a novel as encouraging handicapism, the portrayal of the character with a disability must be addressed so that the teacher can discourage readers from walking away from the story with harmful stereotypes of people with disabilities. Just as with non-disabled people, one cannot assume that all people with a certain disability or condition will behave in the same way. Every individual has a unique personality and set of circumstances and experiences that shape his or her identity, and so his or her stories must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, one must also consider the questions that are asked of students when reading these stories, as well as the questions that are not asked. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that students ponder questions that will lead to an enlightening discussion and a greater understanding of not just the text, but of how language is used to sculpt the way people perceive the world around them.

Handicapism can take many different shapes and forms, such as through the various harmful models of disability. Those who subscribe to the medical model may believe that all

disabilities should be “fixed” or “cured,” but this proves to be problematic when people choose to live their life with their condition and not be subject to countless surgeries and doctor visits. Furthermore, eugenics often takes root here because genetic health is seen as black and white, and followers of the medical model ultimately wish to eradicate disability through science. Though most medical model enthusiasts would not call themselves eugenicists, such beliefs may stir some parties to advocate for what they believe will improve the genetic quality of the population, which results in society depriving people with disabilities of their sexuality, or even going as far as sterilization.

When prejudices interfere with others’ rights to act as a citizen in any capacity, these prejudices become more than just opposing viewpoints: they become harmful and oppressive. For this reason, literary studies in the secondary English classroom must embrace disability studies as it has embraced the critical lenses of race and gender. Because of their overwhelming popularity in the classroom, *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* provide prime examples of disability literature for students to critically examine under the thoughtful guidance of teachers. By making young people aware of the models of disability and how they can harm actual people, young readers will likely be more aware of their environment and how people are discussed and treated, and gain necessary critical thinking skills that will help them throughout life.

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