

THE PORTRAYAL OF BLINDNESS IN SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

Short stories as part of the literature play a significant role in portraying the human lifestyle, including the image of disabilities. Studying the portrayal of disabled people in literature becomes significant to consider the need to change the illustration of disabilities in fiction. There are four short stories selected in this study, namely "Cathedral" By Raymond Carver, "The Blind Man" by Guy de Maupassant, "The Blind Man" by Kate Chopin and "A Man Who Had No Eyes" by Benjamin MacKinlay Kantor. Applying disability theory proposed by Tobin Siebers, this textual analysis study found that the characters in the four stories are portrayed as weak, dependent, unproductive, and other negative prejudice. They receive this treatment due to the social misconception about disabilities.

Keywords: Disabilities, Blindness, Portrayal, Short Stories

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been rich with the portrayal of human life, including the depiction of the life of a disabled person. Literature, mostly, illustrate men, women, and child characters with disabilities as feared, helpless, despicable and sometimes evil. Furthermore, the disabled character is mainly used as a supporting character that develops fear and hatred (Davis, 1995:156-7). In many novels, poems and dramas, disabled people seem to be prejudiced and stereotyped as dependent and hopeless. This portrayal is highly affecting the readers and society's attitude toward the disabled.

The literature as a reflection of society also affects how society sees life, especially disabled people. Brannigan (1998:132) stated that text produced in society is a reflection of its condition. Therefore, literature plays an important role to realize cultural practice. It is literature that makes readers aware of many social issues such as slavery, racism, and feminism. In other words, literature somehow sells a lifestyle.

The depiction of disabilities has become a significant issue for the image of this group of people. Literature should play a positive depiction of disabled people to promote better understanding, knowledge and respect. It is vital to represent people with disabilities

positively to help disabled people see themselves in stories and provide knowledge and understanding for people without disabilities (Wopperer, 2011). The positive representation of disabled people may promote better understanding, respect and eliminating negative prejudice (Dyches & Prater, 2000).

This study analyzed four short stories depicting disabled people, the first is "Cathedral" By Raymond Carver. This short story is included in *The Best American Short Stories* (1982). This story tells how blind people change man's perspective dramatically and introduces him to a new realm of experience. The narrator illustrates blind people, his view of the world of disabled, and shows the attitude of the world of the disabilities.

The second short story is "The Blind Man" by Guy de Maupassant. This short piece examines the experience of the blind man and the severe behavior that he experienced in the hands of his family and the community. The author highlights the different levels of oppression and cruelty exhibited to the old man. It is through such depiction that de Maupassant offers a chilling reality surrounding evil and man's capability in the promotion of oppression.

The third is "The Blind Man" by Kate Chopin. Kate Chopin in this story discussing the theme of conflict, struggle, independence, change, and connection. It tells about the blind man who is on his journey facing some everyday obstacles. This man is told to encounter many mistreatments and receiving no empathy from its surrounding.

The fourth is *A Man Who Had No Eyes*, a short story by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Benjamin Mackinlay Kantor. It tells about the events of a chance encounter between two men on the street. One is a respectable gentleman ("Parsons"), and the other is a beggar ("Markwardt"). They talk for a while, and Markwardt tries to gain the sympathy of the richer Parsons.

The definition of "disability" is used to refer to a different class of people with "inability" or limitations on rights and powers (Boorse, 2010). The term disability covers a number of conditions such as loss of thinking ability or loss of limb or sensory function. The disability also identified as impairment of physical characteristics which reconstructed as social and political process (Swain et al. 2003: 23)

In the social context, people often label people with disabilities with a negative stigma, discrimination, and attributions, and inferiority. Boorse (2010) stated that disability becomes status which inherently prevents disabled people from playing a social role. Many nondisabled people believe that disabled people cannot be good partners and become parents (Asch and Fine, 1988). People with disabilities are often seen as helpless or weak because they need assistance with some facets of daily life (Wright, 1983).

The assumption on people with disabilities was reflected across literature from children's stories to adult novels and plays until recently. The physical impairment is usually adapted to literature as a villain or a monster. In many children's tales, many villain characters resemble disabled people such as one-eyed evil captain, giants, one-armed captains, scarface, and those people are identified as evil because their body is very different from the "good" people (Goldman, 1990).

The literature attempts to mark or made evilly visible using disabilities so that the audience can understand easier. Until now, physical and mental characteristics (disabilities) are endlessly misunderstood. Perhaps, the root of justification for attributing disabilities to evil is from a social, physical, and knowledge-based timeline. Quicke (1985) said:

“There are, latent to the dominant culture, ideas about handicap and disability from an earlier period which still have considerable force. An example is the notion, which runs through the history of Western civilization and is legitimated by various religious teachings, that disability indicates possession by the devil or by an evil force, or is the outcome of evil doing” (p. 3).

Furthermore, King (2007) stated that guilt feeling may sometimes result in the rationalization that disabled persons may detest and are jealous of the nondisabled. It is believed that disabled villains are angry about their fate and hate those who are not disabled.

Reading literature, especially stories with disabilities, should make the reader knowledgeable about the topic and promote understanding, respect, and remove negative prejudice. Bishop (1990) stated that reading literature should transform human experience and transform it back to us, and the reader should learn a meaningful lesson about how disabilities are devalued in the community in which they are apart. Furthermore, Eagleton (1983, p.35) noted that:

“...The strength of Leavisian criticism was not that it was able to provide an answer, as Sir Walter Raleigh was not, to the question, why read Literature? The answer, in a nutshell, was that it made you a better person”.

The scope of literature should be expanded by removing stereotypical characters and put them in more believable situations. Disabled people should not be portrayed as fearsome, evil, weak, and with other negative prejudice. Based on the above context, disable people commonly occur in fiction with various degrees of portrayal, several are positive while many others are negative. According to Longmore (1987): “The depiction of the disabled person as “monster” and the criminal characterization both express to varying degrees the notion that disability involves the loss of an essential part of one’s humanity. Depending on the extent of the disability, the individual is perceived as more or less subhuman” (p. 135). Therefore, the current study aims to describe the disability, blindness, portrayal in the four short stories and discuss the discourse of disability within the story.

METHOD

The study uses a textual analysis method to uncover the portrayal of blind people in the four short stories, namely Cathedral By Raymond Carver, “The Blind Man” by guy de Maupassant, “The Blind Man” by Kate Chopin and A Man Who Had No Eyes by Benjamin MacKinlay Kantor. The method collects data from words, phrases, themes, and any

expression found in the four short stories. Using this method, the researcher can interpret and analyze the presence, meaning, and relationship to answer the research question.

This study reveals the portrayal of disabled persons, blind person, found in the four short stories. The depiction of the character is studied based on the plot, characterization, setting, point of view, and theme. These intrinsic elements are used to illustrate the stereotype and representation of the disabled person in the four stories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Representation of Blind People “Cathedral” By Raymond Carver

The story begins with a narrator describing that he does not like a blind man visiting his wife for the fact that he is blind. He also has no experience meeting any blind man, which makes him unsettling. The blind man is a good friend of his wife and keeps close contact through the tape to talk about everything and everyone.

The portrayal of negative prejudice is started when the narrator wife’s picks up the blind man from the train station while the narrator waits at home. The narrator is amazed by the appearance of the blind man who has a sports beard and not wearing black glasses, which seems unnatural for a blind man. His surprise continues when they have dinner. The blind man can eat “normally” and smoke like him. The blind man also very communicative and knowledgeable.

The narrator and husband talk over many subjects while watching tv about a cathedral. While watching the blind man requested for pen and paper to draw the cathedral. He puts his hands on the narrator's hand and following the movement. This experience gives the narrator a blissful experience of being with a blind man.

The portrayal of the blind man in this story is dominated by the negative prejudice of the narrator towards a blind man.

“his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies.

In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed.” (Carver, 2015: p. 3)

The narrator's perspective on the blind man is so much influenced by the media as presented in the data above. He believes that blind man move slowly due to the loss of sight and having difficulties finding direction making them unable to move easily. Furthermore, he thinks that a blind man should be cold and has no sense of humor which may affect communication, and rapport building becomes difficult. This false assumption is caused by the media, which mostly shows wrong information about people with blindness.

“I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led.

Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one.” (Carver, 2015: p. 3)

The narrator assumes that being blind would hinder any blind person from expressing love to their spouses of a loved one. It surely makes the blind person a non-ideal love partner as they are unable to appreciate their spouse's beauty and facial

emotional expression as they are unable to see the smile. This negative prejudice is surely groundless and affecting any blind person's image.

"I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind." (Carver, 2015: p. 5)

"he knew just where everything was on his plate." (Carver, 2015: p. 6)

It indicates that the narrator believes that blind man should depend on other humans to fulfill their daily needs. He thinks that blind man should have difficulties in eating, such as locating meals and cutlery. People with disabilities are often seen as helpless or weak because they need assistance with some facets of daily life (Wright, 1983). This negative prejudice is caused by the standard of "normal" people.

The Representation of Blind People "The Blind Man" by Guy de Maupassant

This story is about a blind character who has no name. The story begins by describing the imagery of joy and the beauty of the sky which is an irony for the blind man who is condemned with eternal darkness. He is taken care of by his parents. After they die, he is cared for by his sister and brother-in-law, who give him barely enough food to survive while his relative takes his wealth. He experiences humiliation and maltreatment from his surroundings. They put animals on the table to see if the blind man notice them, and, sometimes, they also put garbage in his food. His family and his surroundings hate him because he is useless, dependent, and unable to work. They think that he is a burden and resent his existence. The blind man also experiences physical violence from people around him. However, the blind man accepts this treatment silently without making any resistance.

Later in the story, the blind man becomes a beggar to pay for his food. Unfortunately, he lives in a poor society who works as a farmer. His brother-in-law then brings him far away to beg at the side of the road and never comes back for him. He cannot find his way home and eventually wander around the village to find shelter as the winter getting colder. Finally, he died freezes by the snow. His family pretends to find him but is more relieved for his gone.

The portrayal of a blind person in this story is dependent, weak, unproductive, and violent.

"As long as his father and mother lived, he was more or less taken care of."

(De Maupassant, 2001: 1)

The narrator illustrates that the blind man has been dependent on the care of his family. He cannot survive without the help of others. This story also portrays that the disabled person should rely on the neighborhood for food. The story does not mention any capability of the blind man to survive.

"Had he any intellect, any thinking faculty, any consciousness of his own existence? Nobody cared to inquire." (De Maupassant. 2001: 1)

The narrator describes that the blind man is considered to be weak physically and mentally. People with disabilities are often seen as helpless or weak because they need

assistance with some facets of daily life (Wright, 1983). This illustration indicates that the blind man is even lower than animals and inhuman. Nobody in the story cares for his feeling as a human just because he is blind.

“for in country places useless persons are considered a nuisance, and the peasants would be glad to kill the infirm of their species, as poultry do.”

(De Maupassant. 2001: 2)

The above quotation indicates the negative prejudice on disabled people as weak and useless. The blindness makes him a nuisance for others and is at the same level as an animal. This kind of prejudice is attached to him without any way of resistance.

“ his incapacity for work as well as his impassiveness eventually exasperated his relatives.” (De Maupassant. 2001: 1)

The narrator describes that his loss of eyesight capability makes him unable to work. His unproductiveness makes his family despise him and considers him a burden because he cannot contribute to the economic family.

The blind man suffers a lot of physical and mental violence throughout the story.

“Another time they made him chew corks, bits of wood, leaves, or even filth, which he was unable to distinguish.”

“he became a laughingstock, a sort of butt for merriment, a prey to the inborn ferocity, to the savage gaiety of the brutes who surrounded him.”

(De Maupassant. 2001: 2)

The quotation above shows that the blind man suffers from mental abuse from his family and neighborhood. People labeled him as a joke and an object of humiliation. People treat him inhumanly by giving him garbage to eat while others use him as an object of humiliation.

“Then came a new pleasure--the pleasure of smacking his face.” (De Maupassant. 2001: 2)

This story also portrays physical abuse on the disabled person. His brother-in-law hit him on the face for his annoyance toward him, as illustrated from the data above. These people hate the blind man because he is useless. He cannot work, and yet they have to give him food, and they resent him for that. Eventually, they move past tricks and into physical violence, hitting him whenever they see him.

The Representation of Blind People “The Blind Man” by Kate Chopin

This story illustrates a blind man carrying a small red box full of He sells lead pencil walking down a street. His clothes' colors are faded due to the weather, and he uses a straw hat. He looks weak despite not very old. Although he is blind, he walks without a cane. The narrator perceives him to walk on the wrong side of the street due to his inability to see. After knocking on several houses, he still unable to sell lead pencils. One day, a group of children is curious about the red box and tried to take it away from him. He resists and shouts, which catches the attention of the police saving him from a bad predicament. At the end of the story, just as the blind man crossing the street without the

help of others, he causes a car accident and walks away without noticing the accident near him.

In this story, the blind man is portrayed as weak, unproductive, dependent, an object of violence, and prejudiced negatively.

“Sometimes, after reaching the door with great difficulty, he could not find the electric button.”

“he would consume much time striving to open them, which made little difference, as he had all the time there was at his disposal.” (Chopin, K. 1897: p.1)

This quotation illustrates when the blind man tries to sell pencil lead. He has difficulties to knock the door or locating the doorbell. The narrator emphasizes the dependency of the blind. The blind man is struggling just to ring the bell. To complete a simple task for “normal” people to accomplish would be a challenging task for the blind man.

“The man had been out long and had walked far, but had sold nothing.” (Chopin, K. 1897: p.1)

The narrator indicates that the blind man is unproductive. Although he strives to sell pencil lead to support his life, he fails to sell anything. He wastes his time energy for nothing. The blind man is incapable of economic effort.

“for he was blind, and moreover he was stupid.” (Chopin, K. 1897: p.1)

This illustration indicates that the narrator perceives the blind man with negative prejudice. He believes that the behavior of the blind man indicating stupidity. His personal judgment on blindness is closely related to stupidity.

“One of them attempted to take it away from him. With the instinct to protect his own and his only means of sustenance, he resisted,” (Chopin, K. 1897: p.1)

Lastly, the quotation above shows that a disabled person is prone to be an object of violence. People often see them as the object that easily to be bullied and have no power of resistance. The portrayal of the blind man in this story illustrates the commonly found treatment of society towards disabled people. It is also interesting that the blind man remains oblivious as to what has happened on the street. It could be to highlight the disconnection of the blind man with others.

The Representation of Blind People “A Man Who Had No Eyes” by MacKinlay Kantor

This story begins by introducing a man walking down a street using a cane to help him along the sidewalk. He brings his bag like selling things, but nobody notices him. After that, he meets Mr. Parsons, a rich man who is just out of his hotel. He feels pity for this blind man, and at the same time, he feels grateful for being alive, successful, rich, and respected. He is proud of himself for being able to change his life on his own without help from others. The blind man comes over, states that he is not a beggar, and offers him a lighter. Mr. Parsons gives him some money so that the blind man goes, but he insists on

selling the lighter and giving it to someone else as a gift. After that, they talked about how the blind man lost his eyes. The blind man lost his eyes due to a chemical explosion 14 years ago. He does not receive any treatment or compensation for his injuries. As many as 108 died, and 50 workers lost their eyes. He is angry because the company receives compensation from the insurance company while he does not. He told Mr. Parsons how he is trampled by someone to escape the chemical explosion site. He believes that the person is living a good life now, while he is blind and miserable. Mr. Parsons corrects the blind man story. He stated that it was the blind man that trampled him to get out. The blind man admits it, but he does not care because he is the one that being blind now. But Mr. Parsons stated that he is also blind, but he does not make a fuss about the accident.

This story is about two blind men, a successful one and a failure one. The portrayal of a blind man in this story is the comparison of the two. The beggar is depicted as a dependent person.

“If I had lost my eyes in the war, okay. I would have been well took care of.” (Kantor, 1967: 1)

He feels that the company and the government are responsible for the accident that happened to him. He feels entitled to receive care for the miserable fate he got into. . This self-image makes the blind man unable to be productive and successful. He lacks the will to change his own condition

Differently, Mr. Parsons is portrayed as a successful person; although he is blind, he is respected and admired. He is a successful businessman in an insurance company despite his blindness.

“he was successful, respected, admired. . .Insurance. . .And he had done it alone, unaided, struggling beneath handicaps.” (Kantor, 1967: 1)

His condition for being disabled does not make him pity himself and expecting others to support him. He strives to make his own success. The depiction of Mr. Parsons is to encourage the reader with disabilities and no disabilities reader that blindness does not make people fail their lives. It is their effort that counts for their life condition.

CONCLUSION

The characters in the four stories are portrayed as weak, dependent, unproductive, and with other negative prejudice. They receive this treatment due to the social misconception about disabilities. The story is colored with bad treatment towards the blind man. This kind of representation might negatively affect the readers, both for disabled and non-disabled people. Literature plays an important role in shaping readers' views on the image of disabilities. Reading literature, especially stories with disabilities, should make the reader knowledgeable about the topic and promote understanding, respect, and remove negative prejudice.

The portrayal of disabilities in the four short stories is full of negative prejudice. The blind men in the stories are described as weak, dependent, unproductive, and other negative prejudice. They are often seen as a burden for their family and society. These

blind man also subjected to physical and psychological violence from other people in their surroundings. It may be caused by the misunderstanding of the environment and strengthened by the media and bad social beliefs on disabled people. Society is still holding on to the belief that blind people are fated to be fail and dependent. There is no future for this kind of person.

However, it is important to promote stories such as the “Cathedral” and *A Man Who Had No Eyes*. The two stories described that blind men could be independent and successful. Any disabled person can achieve success and become a good partner for other humans. They can learn and work like other non-disabled people. *A Man Who Had No Eyes* especially points out that it is not physical deficiencies that hinder the success, but their character to handle matters that happened in life. This kind of story is good to promote insight for a disabled and non-disabled person.

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