Disabled Voices

When considering what constitutes identity, answers may vary as identity is both broad and multidimensional. Intersectionality elevates this idea, suggesting that all aspects of a human being intersect in different ways both forming their identity and affecting society's perception of them. Identity has been a basis for discrimination throughout humanity, with certain identifiers reigning in significance, such as race, religion, or gender. Although society as a whole has made substantial progress in embracing inclusivity and diversity, some dimensions of identity continue to be disregarded such as disability. In recent years, discussions on institutionalized racism and misogyny have been increasingly represented in the media and in various institutions but there is yet to be a significant conversation regarding discrimination against the disability community. In comparing Katherine Ann Porter's "He" and Ellen Samuel's "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time*"*, the progress in regards to disability discrimination can be better understood, permitting insight into the disability experience, the various forms it takes, and answering the question why the disability community is often not included in intersectionality conversations and political reform, despite the overt presence of institutionalized discrimination.

Discrimination and disability have coexisted for centuries with the majority of progress taking place within the last fifty years. Although the situation is better today, disability discrimination is unique as it is embedded within almost every domain of life, including health/healthcare, family and relationships, work prosperity, and policy. Further emphasizing the uniqueness of disability discrimination is the individualized nature of disability in general. Disability, as a term, is broad and encompasses many different unique experiences ranging from physical, mental, to intellectual deficits. Thus, the experienced discrimination of each individual varies greatly.

Katherine Ann Porter's "He", depicts the realities of intellectual disability during the 1930's in the rural South. The short story specifically focuses on familial reactions to disability regarding Mrs. Whipple, the mother of the intellectually disabled boy, referred to only as "He," and the boy's own experiences of how he can relate and interact with the world around him. Mrs. Whipple, like any mother should, "Loved her second son, the simple-minded one, better than she loved the other two children put together. She was forever saying so, and when she talked with certain of her neighbors, she would even throw in her husband and her mother for good measure" (Porter 1). Maternal love is expected and normal but Mrs.Whipple overly emphasizes her love for her disabled son over her other children and family, which strikes the reader as unusual. Typically parents should not have favorites amongst their children, and if they do, it would be inappropriate to acknowledge it openly, especially with neighbors.

Due to her son's disability though, Mrs.Whipple feels an intense pressure to justify her son's existence as her neighbors would often talk " plainly among themselves. 'A Lord's pure mercy if He should die,' they said. 'It's the sins of the fathers,' they agreed among themselves. 'There's bad blood and bad doings somewhere, you can bet on that'" (Porter 1). His disability is publicly understood as a physical representation of sin thus solely attributing negative qualities to him. Superstition in understanding disabilities was common in this time period, portraying disability as a punishment. The shame and stigma associated with disability is so penetrating that even Mrs.Whipple exhibits her own symptoms of shame about her disabled son as she "hated to talk about it, she tried to keep her mind off it, but every time anybody set foot in the house, the subject always came up, and she had to talk about Him first, before she could get on to anything else. It seemed to ease her mind" (Porter 1). Feeling responsible, Mrs.Whipple consistently aims to justify her son's existence and highlight his positive qualities to both convince others, and herself, that he is worth something. Reflecting on maternity, maternal love seems to be an innate experience, with love existing naturally, despite a child's behaviors. For Mrs.Whipple though, and other mothers with disabled children, maternal love may require more force due to external judgements and the personal hardships of being the caretaker for an individual with a disability, especially during this time period. Thus He experiences a constant sort of discrimination from his own community and family.

Disability discrimination, such as His, is unique as he is unable to respond to it as a regular-abled individual would be able to. When climbing in the trees outside one day, His neighbors watched in disapproval instigating Mrs.Whipple to nearly scream at the neighbor, "'He *does*know what He's doing! He's as able as any other child! Come down out of there, you!' When He finally reached the ground she could hardly keep her hands off Him for acting like that before people, a grin all over His face" (Porter 2). As many children do it, climbing trees is not abnormal behavior but because He is doing it, it invokes a reaction. He demonstrates understanding as he responds to his mother's request to come down, having "a grin all over His face" when he does. Despite his lack of verbal ability, his grin suggests emotional capacity, humanizing him to the reader. Not only does he understand his environment but he responds to it in his own special way. Regardless, others cannot seem to recognize this, continuing to discriminate against and isolate him, including his own family who eventually has to send him away due to their lack of resources to properly care for him. Immediately before dropping Him off at the hospital, Mrs.Whipple comes to a realization, "Mrs. Whipple couldn't believe what she saw; He was scrubbing away big tears that pulled out of the corners of His eyes. He sniveled and made a gulping noise… for He seemed to be accusing her of something. Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears, maybe He had been scared that day with the bull, maybe He had slept cold and couldn’t tell her about it” (Porter 6). This tragic ending to the short story is significant as it evokes an emotional reaction in Mrs.Whipple and in the reader. Throughout the story, He remains nonverbal and relatively passive thus contributing to an uncertain position on his awareness and capabilities. In this moment, He becomes human in the most fundamental standards; he can feel.

In Bruce Jorgesen’s literary review of the story “He”, he reflects on various interpretations and opinions on the text, many of which focusing on the tragic ending in varying degrees of empathy, “In 1965…George Hendrick saw the story as ‘stressing the irony of the situation but ending with compassion for both the mother and child,’ yet he did not allow that the reader could have compassion for Mrs. Whipple before the end; he felt, rightly I think, that the boy is ‘beyond human help,’ able to ‘receive but… not [to] return love’” (Jorgensen 397). This interpretation by Hendrick further emphasizes the general lack of understanding when it comes to disability as he claims that the “boy is ‘beyond human help.’”. Although He has health problems, his sickness only amplifies his disability thus limiting how much help he is able to receive. Henrick’s comment begs the question whether or not He would have received more help from others, his family or community, if he were typically abled. Moreover, the time period context of this comment demonstrates the slow progress in disability discrimination as it was made three decades following the writing of the short story.

Thirty years, although long enough to allow for some progress, is not substantial enough for transformative progress especially in regards to general societal understanding, political development, and institutional care. Ellen Samuel’s “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time” allows for a better evaluation of disability discrimination progress through her account and reflection on her own experiences in recent years. Samuel’s essay centers on the relation between disability and time. As time is possibly one of the most foundational elements when it comes to the organization of modern society, her differentiation between “standard” time and “crip time” highlights how deeply rooted the preference for typically-abled individuals is and how intertwined disability and discrimination are, whether intentional or not. Time, as a societal construct, relates to the disability population differently as Samuel writes,

> *Crip time is time travel*. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get (Samuels 2).

Time is something that typically controls life patterns through aging and life stages associated with various cultures and societies. These patterns though do not apply to the disabled population as their lives often do not follow a linear path. Due to health concerns, lack of progress, and the widely different variations of disability, time is not necessarily an influence on how many disabled individuals conceptualize and organize their lives. Time also affects their physicality differently, thus magnifying any incongruence with the normal population and leading to unintentional discrimination, both socially and institutionally. As Samuels states, some disabled people “contend with the impairments while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get” (Samuels 2). When considering physical disabilities, young individuals may remain totally mentally and intellectually competent but are restricted by their own bodies in participating/acting in society the way they may please, as is the case for Ellen Samuels.

Until the ADA (the American Disabilities Act) was passed in the 1990’s, physical disability prevented inclusivity in the work force and public spaces. Today this is no longer as much of a reality in the United States, thus demonstrating some applaudable progress, but “the medical language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time” (Samuels 2). The concept of time relates to disability on a deeper level than solely capabilities or opportunities, it also poses volatility that most individuals never have to experience. Within the medical realm, time is imposed on “crips” when they are not regulated by time while the normal population experiences time as a, often, universal experience/path. This being said, it is difficult to place blame for certain discriminations as it is unintended. Time is used to organize life but as a disabled person, organized life is not as obtainable,

> I hate them for their decades of proper health, for their unconscious privilege, for the fact that only in their older age are they contending with not being able to hike, or bike, or net, or whatever it is they’re talking about as they move in their little companionable knots around the pool. I know that I’m being unfair. I know that I know nothing about their lives, what they may have lost. So I keep my route inside (2).

Because ability is normative, many people do not consider it a privilege, but instead a part of living. Thus discrimination, in this sense, is unintended and there seems to be no blame to place.

Ellen Samuel’s essay further permits insight into the importance of disability voices in literature as they promote a wider exposure to and understanding of the disability experience. In her reflection on her own experiences, sympathy and compassion from the reader can be evoked, possibly inspiring progress and change when it comes to inclusion. Although “He” also induces emotions of pity and compassion, the disabled boy lacks a voice, preventing any relatable insight. Moreover, if “He” was written from His perspective, the reader might experience a set of emotions other than tragedy and understanding, but sympathy and anger due to his constant mistreatment. The importance of disabled authors' voices is here demonstrated as their works permit insight into the disability experience, hopefully inspiring change that has yet to be considered. In other words, first-person narration can be really effective in spreading awareness and perspective. This being said, as briefly stated at the beginning of this paper, disability encompasses a wide range of impairments exceeding the physical realm such as mental or intellectual deficits. The individuals with these deficits often lack the capability to advocate for themselves, as is the case with the eponymous character of “He”. In these situations, it is vital for the family and friends of this population to advocate for them in order for effective change to occur, even if the change solely means inclusion in political discourse and media. Disability discrimination, as demonstrated in these two texts, varies across time periods and types of disabilities but remains prevalent in the most fundamental aspects of society. Disability literature has been underrepresented, thus not contributing to any potential progress. Katherine Porter and Ellen Samuels both create unique insight into the disability experience through their literary texts, demonstrating the effectiveness of literature in representing disenfranchised voices.

Work Cited

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