

The Pitiful Bellringer

The Implications of Representations of Disability in Media & Literature

By

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*To Mikey, who taught me that labels are irrelevant.*

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

**Introduction:** Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? Media, which is integral to our daily lives more so today than it has ever been, has always had the power to influence perception and affect public opinion. When researching the portrayal of disabilities in media, it appears that the two shift in unison: as modern societies transcend to more sensitive notions toward disabilities, media adapts accordingly. Or is it the other way around? Regardless, in this era of “heightened sensitivity” or quasi-enlightenment, there are both positive and negative implications for how modern media portrays disabilities.

**Problem Statement:** Throughout history, those who were “different” or “atypical” were often relegated to a marginalized life and, according to societal beliefs of the time, deserved loneliness; this perspective was indicative in literature of previous eras as well as in historical documentation. However, as indicated in my research, as society has moved away from personifying disability as a villainous monster, it has consequently moved toward characterizing people with disabilities as the tear-inducing antihero worthy of pity. Ultimately, is one better or worse than the other?

**Significance of the Problem:** The unintentional, prejudicial view of people with disabilities in popular culture is perpetuating the idea that disability is something that must be overcome rather than a quality as inherent as the color of one’s skin. This disconnect hinders student awareness and acceptance, and therefore negates many positive attempts, and perhaps even inclusion measures, made by educational professionals.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this project is to investigate perceptions of disability throughout history, and then research modern examples of overt and not so overt prejudice, so that educators can use these as learning tools in their classroom.

Teaching acceptance involves more than a lecture; students must be empowered to analyze the methods by which media depiction has molded and influenced societal interpretation for centuries.

**Rationale:** Although positive strides have been made, media and popular culture are still underscoring “difference” when representing people, or characters, with disabilities. This runs counter to the goal of acceptance; the educational system must find ways to showcase why this unintentional conveyance of difference is not acceptable. It is not enough to show students examples of what media deems “typical” or otherwise; teachers must also give students the power to analyze, question, and assess why these modern representations are, or are not, acceptable.

**Definition of Terms:**

1. Ableism: The belief that the able-bodied are the norm, and as such, disability can and should be overcome.
2. Able-Body: The “typical” person; one who has the health and strength of a typical body.
3. Anti-Disablist: Similar to ableism in the sense that the normative version of beauty and physical prowess is acceptable, and all other occurrences that vary from this norm should be discarded and/or overcome.

4. Bandy Legged: A condition typically apparent at birth in which the legs bow or bend outward at the knees; often used to describe a lack of capability of effectiveness or physical ability.
5. Realism: Instilling the understanding that just because a person has a disability does not mean they are to be pitied, and in fact, portray how they may lead, and are entitled to, fulfilling lives like every other person.
6. Supercrip: The belief that living with a disability is tragic and being able to accomplish any feat, regardless of level of difficulty, is heroic. The implication is that one's worth is determined by what they do "in spite of their disability," rather than what they do "in spite of being human."
7. Tragic View of Impairment: A perception that categorizes a person with a disability as pitiful or lamentable. In addition, many argue that merely categorizing a disability as impairment implies a negative, tragic circumstance.

**Summary:** One of the most important and positive efforts to end stereotypes surrounding disability stems from simple dialogue and discourse; certain actions, portrayals, and words are no longer "okay," and opponents of these culturally-ingrained stigmas are making their voices heard via activism.

The view of disability comes down to attitude and how a culture conveys it. Perception can be shifted with examples of: realism (people with disabilities are not perpetual children, and they, too, live fulfilling lives); accurate portrayals

(entertainment companies should make greater effort to employ actors who have disabilities; no more artificial manufacturing of disabilities); positive terminology (to people with an intellectual disability, the “R word” is just as hurtful as the “N word”); “person-first” language (the disability does not define a person, therefore a person *has* a disability—they are not *a* disabled person); and expand the view of diversity (focus on *all* people who stand up for their rights, regardless of disability, race, or ethnicity) (EIC-SOI Report, 2007).

American culture has already made significant steps toward equality; just 20 years ago, there wouldn’t even be a discussion on this topic, which is a true testament of progress and acceptance. The secret is providing people with the courage and empowerment to enact change. The educational system has an obligation to not only show students how these portrayals have affected their views of disability and “difference,” but also to commit to instilling sensitivity in the classroom that will carry with students throughout their lives. This project aims to show how these prejudices developed, and how alleviating bias can be achieved through investigation via classroom inquiry.

Chapter 2  
Literature Review

## Antiquated Perspectives of Disability

“One would have pronounced him a giant who had been broken and badly put together again ... When this species of cyclops appeared on the threshold of the chapel, motionless ... in the perfection of his ugliness, the populace recognized him on the instant, and shouted ... ‘Tis Quasimodo, the bellringer! Tis Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame! Quasimodo, the one-eyed! Quasimodo, the bandy-legged! ...’

*‘Let the women with child beware!’* shouted the scholars. The women did, in fact, hide their faces.

*‘Oh! the horrible monkey!’* said one of them.

*‘As wicked as he is ugly,’* retorted another.

*‘He’s the devil,’* added a third.

*‘Oh! What a displeasing hunchback’s face!’*

*‘Oh! What an ill-favored soul!’*” (Hugo, 1831).

Once upon a time, those born lacking in sight or hearing, those who differed in intellectual capabilities, those who spoke with difficulty or had a different appearance, or those whose gaits were hindered by disease, were portrayed as lonesome, loveless, and gruesome souls whom the general public either pitied or feared. Such was the case with the reader’s first meeting of Victor Hugo’s hapless antihero, Quasimodo, in the *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

Well-known tales depicting good versus evil mold the young reader’s (or listener’s) mind with the following notions: those who are different than us are often evil; physical or cognitive variations are not human; disfigurements must be ignored

or fixed; and those “suffering” from these conditions often serve a lonely fate. These connotations have appeared in both religious doctrines and literature for centuries. For example, Biblical documents show that leprosy was treated as a scourge in which God was serving retribution for mankind’s sin; those inflicted with this disease were alienated from civilization. In literature, disabilities also appeared as devilish and amoral: the wicked witch who limped with crutches in “Hansel and Gretel,” or the sad, pitiful girl who received silver prosthetic hands only after she spent a lifetime of suffering and repentance in “The Maiden Without Hands.” Rather than blaming the Apostles or the Brothers Grimm for perpetuating such stereotypes, we must now question if modern media also reinforces these notions with the message that as soon as the disability is overcome, then, and only then, can there be a “happily-ever-after” ending. Sadly, literary or theatrical depictions have often given these storied characters their overdue peace upon death, as was the case with Quasimodo, Lennie in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, and “The Elephant Man,” aka Joseph Merrick; each of these characters were constructed into the quintessentially tragic hero.

Society’s perception of “normal” and “abnormal” has been compared to Eurocentric colonization—the discovery of unknown lands and exploration of these lands and their indigenous people (whom were regarded as nothing more than mere specimens) (McPhail & Freeman, 2005). The correlation is that as the medical community embarked on new scientific curiosities within the last century and a half, the human body and mind began to be viewed as “unchartered territory open to exploration” (McPhail & Freeman, 2005, p. 256). That mindset shaped the medical

model of “fixing defective” individuals that weren’t mainstream. This type of cultural view was perfectly illustrated at the 1904 World’s Fair in which visitors observed “defectives and primitives ... organized into human displays based on scientific gradations of disability and savagery” (Trent, 1998, p. 209). These “curiosities” (in this instance, they were “deaf, dumb, and blind” and “Filipino”) were categorized as “other.”

### Imagery in Literature

Perceptions have obviously improved since 1904, but there is still a pervasive, albeit unspoken and perhaps unintentional, prejudicial view of people with disabilities: they’re often portrayed as one-dimensional charity cases in need of rescuing. A recent British study (Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, & Shah, 2010) analyzed 100 modern children’s books (published after 1990) for any evidence of positive or negative stereotypes/ideas of disabilities. A number of discouraging findings were uncovered: 30 of the books that were examined used outdated language to describe a disability; eight enlisted the idea of disability as a moral “lesson for us all” (meaning disability is something to be overcome and is only likely to occur *if* the disabled person is good and courageous); eight books had unrealistic happy endings (e.g., miracle cures); seven characterized the person with a disability as something of a “curiosity” or “freak show”; and 33 portrayed a tragic view of disability, which Beckett et. al. (2010) explained is when the writer attempts to evoke sympathy, not empathy from the reader. “This type of approach runs the risk of perpetuating the idea that having an impairment is a ‘terrible thing’ – an ‘affliction’ – and it is only when

bullies start to feel sorry for their victims because ‘now they know how they feel’, that their behavior changes,” ( p. 379). The researchers stated that avoiding a tragic view of the disability is imperative; but they also insinuated that living with a disability is not free of difficulties, either. A society’s culture must shift their perspective from one of pity to one of equality.

There was a positive side to the Beckett et. al. (2010) study, however. Not considering modern adaptations of fairy tales, which the researchers described as “political correctness gone mad” (p. 382), 55 of the analyzed texts did not exhibit any of the aforementioned findings. In this second group of books, 40 had themes that depicted inclusive classrooms, activities, home life, etc., which reinforced acceptance, diversity, and equality. In one specific example cited by Beckett et. al. (2010), there was never any written mention of the character’s disability in the book, yet the accompanying illustrations showed her in a wheelchair; hence, the central focus was not on the disability—it was on the person. The other set of positive findings was what Beckett et. al. (2010) coined as “anti-disablist,” which is defined as promoting positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. In these 15 instances, not only were people with impairments shown in an inclusive, equal light, but the author encouraged the young reader to also question stereotypes and social barriers, such as the “tragic view of impairment” that positions the person as pitiful or lame.

Positive role models are important for any group. Individuals with disabilities in the community can serve as mentors and activists to help alter perception (Storey,

2007), but exploring literature, films, and other media that accurately depict disabilities and examine the predominant stigmas can be just as influential.

### Ableism and the Supercrip

Tiny Tim (from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*) is often referenced as the "poster child" for disabilities; a charity case that plays on people's fears. Although the Dickensian version is outdated (he purportedly suffered from rickets), the modern-day poster child of disability is the face of telethons or direct mail campaigns, and the message is still the same: "The poster child says it's not okay to be disabled ... it says this could happen to you, your child, or your grandchild. But if you donate money, the disabled children will go away" (Shapiro, 1993, p. 14).

Ableism is the belief that disability is something that could, and should, be overcome (Hehir, 2005). There's no denying that living in a world not designed for wheelchairs—especially when you're in a wheelchair—has its difficulties. Individuals with disabilities, however, want equal rights and access, not charity or pity. They don't want a cure, either: most people with a disability say that if offered, they wouldn't swallow a magical pill that would eliminate their disability—it's a part of their whole (Shapiro, 1993). Just as much, say, as a person's sense of humor or the color of his or her hair is a part of his or her self.

So often we applaud a person's triumph solely because of his accomplishing it *in spite of* their disability—which brings us to the media's depiction of the

inspirational “supercrip.” The connotation of the supercrip stems from the belief that living with a disability is tragic, and being able to accomplish *anything* is heroic. Hehir (2005) referenced press coverage of a blind man, named Erik Weihenmayer (Hardin & Hardin, 2004), to describe this unintentional bias. Weihenmayer climbed Mount Everest in 2001; he was the first blind person ever to do so. This is, admittedly, an amazing feat for anyone. It’s also appropriately inspiring to learn of a person with a disability accomplishing this—a feat most of us could not achieve regardless of physical challenges. However, this “admiration” is a double-edged sword: the media’s representation of Weihenmayer’s journey brought attention to disability, but it promoted pity instead of respect because it focused on the disability, not the man. To wit, it perpetuates “the [culture’s] failure to accept and value disabled people as they are” (Hehir, 2005, p. 17). In response to the media coverage touting the disability over the person, Hardin & Hardin (2004) argued that although it’s well-intentioned, this “feel-good” approach undermined the intrinsic empowerment that people (whom in this case happen to have a disability) obtained because of their achievements.

### Popular Culture

Stories of the supercrip are pervasive in the media—stories that often demean “the less dramatic struggles that people with disabilities face regularly ... implying that they are somehow failures if they haven’t done something extraordinary” (England-Kennedy, 2008, p. 99). Few people have the courage (or politically-

incorrect guts) to acknowledge this self-perpetuating stereotype. In a *South Park* television episode entitled “Krazy Kripples,” one of the series’ token “cripples,” Jimmy, is aghast at the media and public attention Christopher Reeve receives when he comes to South Park. Introduced by the mayor as “courageous” and “amazing,” (Stone & Parker, 2003, as cited by White, 2005), Reeve arrives to town to promote stem cell research so that a cure can be discovered, which will essentially put an end to his disability. While there are many stereotypes exposed in this episode, the overwhelming sentiment is that Jimmy (who has lived his life with a disability and will most likely continue to do so for the rest of his life) is completely invalidated by Reeve (a former “able-body”) who comes to South Park eliciting sympathy for his cause so that he can end this “terrible and unfortunate affliction.” It’s an interesting and valid argument, and creators Stone and Parker turn the tables on the “norm” with an irreverent, but powerful, approach.

Another “pioneer” in social satire is *The Simpsons*. In the episode “Brother’s Little Helper,” Bart’s inherently rebellious nature prompts the diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD). Per Principal Skinner, Bart will be expelled unless he’s “willing to try a radical, untested, potentially dangerous” drug (England-Kennedy, 2008). After beginning “treatment” with a drug called “Focusyne” (a parody of Ritalin), Bart quickly experiences side effects that manifest as paranoia. (He believes Major League Baseball is spying on Springfield via satellites.) This episode touches on our society’s obsession with curing, or in this case, medicating disabilities without any regard for the potential ramifications. The other implication is that Bart, the

consummate trouble maker, must be behaving badly because of ADD. Therefore, ADD equals naughtiness and warrants overprescribing children with potentially dangerous medicine (England-Kennedy, 2008), thereby making the “condition” or “ailment” go away.

Television and cinematic portrayals of disabilities vary greatly. In addition to shows such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, which mock the status quo, series such as *Sesame Street* have been broadcasting depictions of an inclusive society for decades. Informational programs such as *60 Minutes* have also proven to reduce stereotypes (England-Kennedy, 2008) through biographical profiles of people with disabilities. The once-popular television series, *Life Goes On*, is often used as an example of an honest, realistic portrayal of disability: a typical, middle-class family whose struggles are no different than any other typical, middle-class family—except their son (the central character of the show) happens to have been born with Down syndrome. The series (particularly the first season) focuses on the family’s attempts to raise their son in an inclusive world (both educationally and socially). *Life Goes On* goes one step further with its accurate representation, too: the actor who plays this central character, Chris Burke, was born with Down syndrome.

A recent study of thousands of television and film depictions, however, found that the portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities (ID) were predominantly discouraging and inaccurate (Pardun, 2004); most characters were still being depicted as one-dimensional, uncomplicated, piteous victims. Of the 41 movies (2,423 scenes)

and 38 television programs (1,153 scenes) examined, 64% showed people with an ID engaging in casual conversation; 26% were shown sustaining a friendship; and a mere 19% were depicted engaging in “mainstream” activities (such as school, work, or sports). This demonstrates that in terms of accurate representation, “progress overall is not being made” (Pardun, 2004, p. 1). Regardless of what pundits say about increasing disability awareness, the majority of media’s so-called attempts at this are obviously ineffectual.

In the 1996 film “Sling Blade,” for example, which was an Academy Award winner in several categories (The Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts, 1997), the central character, Karl, is a likeable, “simple” man with a dark past: he spent the past 25 years in an institution for bludgeoning his mother and her lover to death. The viewer isn’t told what Karl’s disability is; it could be autism, an emotional and behavioral disorder, or an ID. The film delves into an ethical debate of right versus wrong, e.g., is it okay to murder an evil person if you’re acting as the avenging angel? But the crux of the movie’s disturbing premise unintentionally equates cognitive differences with potentially psychotic, murderous behavior.

Sometimes the negative depictions are much more overt yet hide under the guise of humor or charm. After all, making fun of disabilities is as old as time: Porky Pig’s stutter was meant to be amusing (Johnson, 2008). Mister Magoo’s blindness, which often led him unknowingly toward danger was hysterically funny! And how can we forget Forrest Gump’s “simpleton” outlook (“Life is like a box of chocolates ...”) in all its adorably clever profundity—especially for a person with an ID! Such is

the case with the film “Tropic Thunder,” which could potentially offend every minority group in existence. The movie is set up as a film-within-a-film, and one of the subplots involves Simple Jack (a character with an ID) who is played by Ben Stiller’s character, Tugg Speedman (a past-his-prime actor who does not have an ID). In the long list of potential offenses of “Tropic Thunder” is the usage (17 times) of the words “retarded” and “retard” (Puig, 2008). Promotional movie posters for the “Simple Jack” subplot read, “Once upon a time ... There was a retard” and “What he doesn’t have in his head, he makes up for in his heart.” The film company argued that the movie was satirizing Hollywood and its accompanying excesses, and is only meant to poke fun at stereotypes as well as other movies in which a character with a disability is played by a non-disabled actor in an attempt to wow audiences and win an Oscar (Cieply, 2008). The intent of their over-the-top characterization may be satirical in nature, but they fail to acknowledge the ramifications of disparaging a group of people. If the intent is to be funny, does that then make it okay?

## Chapter 3

### Application

## Inclusive Unit Plan

**Organizing Concept:** This one-week unit will commence upon the conclusion of reading a piece of literature that has a central character with a disability, e.g., *Of Mice and Men*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, or *To Kill A Mockingbird*, just to name a few. Through reflection of previously read literature, this unit aims to activate prior knowledge as students explore, analyze, and discuss antiquated and modern depictions of disability in literature and media (including non-fiction sources). Students will be given an essential question to explore, and then conduct research on disability portrayals in popular culture. Students should brainstorm collectively, and then conduct their research autonomously; they will share their findings the following day. Throughout the week, in small groups, students engage with their chosen “controversy” through critical analysis, lively discussion, ongoing inquiry, and a culminating activity of speaking their arguments while providing a multimodal final presentation.

**Rationale:** This unit will engage students by promoting awareness, encouraging reflection, and activating prior knowledge from previous sources. The activities herein will encourage students to better understand how our perceptions are shaped by representations in media and literature; this improved understanding will empower students to question, and subsequently counter the inaccurate notions that have plagued societies for centuries.

**Enduring Understanding:** Through dialogue, analysis, and reflection, students will leave this unit with an increased awareness to how media and literature inadvertently skew (and perpetuate) bias toward disability. Throughout these lesson plans, students will uncover a deeper understanding of the tragic view of disability and subsequently develop greater sensitivity regarding their own unintentional bias. The activities in this unit will spark student connectivity with learning and personal experiences.

**Essential Questions:**

1. How do representations (or misrepresentations) of disability influence public perception?
2. How can depicting the actions of a person with a disability as heroic be patronizing?
3. Are people with disabilities to be pitied?
4. Why are characters with disabilities often vilified in literature and media?
5. Why should we care about media and literature representations of disability?

<b>The Pitiful Bellringer Introduction &amp; Background</b>		<b>Class: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English Date: Day 1</b>
<b>Objectives</b> Students will: 1. Raise their awareness and understanding of the term “disability” 2. Activate prior knowledge by describing the portrayal of disability in literature and media (including non-fiction sources) 3. Respond to video and discussion by exploring and examining a “controversy”		
<b>Common Core Standards</b> RL 4; RL 11a; RL 11b; RI 1a; RI 7; SL 1		
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Activities:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>
5 min.	<b>Anticipatory Set:</b> Pre- and post-unit anticipation guide	Anticipation Guide (See Figure 1.)
12 min.	Considering how the author portrayed Lennie in <i>Of Mice and Men</i> (or Tom Robinson in <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , etc.), how does that connect to what you know about disabilities? What motif, theme, or idea (e.g., alienation, social isolation, despair, burdensome) does the author use around these characters with disabilities? Share aloud.	Smartboard/journals
22 min.	<b>Video:</b> <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_the_opportunity_of_adversity.html?quote=648">http://www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_the_opportunity_of_adversity.html?quote=648</a>	Smartboard
5 min.	<b>Closure/Ticket-out-the-door:</b> “Write down one instance from something you’ve read or seen in literature or media (outside of this class) that portrays people with disabilities in a negative light.”	Writing Handout (See Figure 2.)
<b>Assessment:</b> This lesson is the opener of the unit. The assessments are the ticket-out-the-door (formal) and the group discussion/anticipatory set (informal and formal).		
<b>Accommodations:</b> Use of assistive technology where applicable; integrating technology; enabling collaborative class-wide discussion; modeling instructions; options for electronic discussion, if applicable		

Table 1. Lesson Plan – Day 1.

**Directions:** Respond to each statement by indicating whether you agree or disagree at the beginning of this unit by placing an ‘X’ or ‘√’ in the category that best matches your current opinion. Then, at the conclusion of this week, you will respond to each statement by indicating whether you still agree or disagree.

Initial		Statement	Conclusion	
Agree	Disagree		Agree	Disagree
		1. I’m impressed when a person with a disability accomplishes anything able-bodied people can do, such as go to work, go to school, make their own lunch, etc.		
		2. A person with disabilities has the same wants, desires, and feelings as every human being.		
		3. A disability is a weakness, and I pity people who have any type of physical or cognitive impairment.		
		4. A disability must be overcome in order to live a happy, productive life.		
		5. The majority of books I have read and television/movies I have seen portray people with disabilities as strong, complete individuals.		

### **Self-Reflection**

Has your opinion regarding the portrayal of disability changed since the beginning of this unit? If so, explain:

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*Figure 1.* Anticipation Guide.

## Write ...

... down one instance from something you've read or seen in literature or media (outside of this class) that portrays people with disabilities in a negative light.

Example: The villain in Peter Pan, Captain Hook, had a physical disability (one hand).

*Figure 2.* Writing Handout.

<b>The Pitiful Bellringer Defining Disability and Connecting to EQ</b>		<b>Class: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English</b> <b>Date: Day 2</b>
<b>Objectives</b> Students will: 1. Make thoughtful predictions of new vocabulary 2. Reflect on previous lesson’s ticket-out-the-door and apply that new knowledge to one of the EQs 3. Reflect on their own misconceptions 4. Collaborate to judge and analyze media and/or literature depictions of disability 5. Use technology to gather historical and contemporary evidence to question and analyze		
<b>Common Core Standards</b> RL 11; RI 1; RI 4; W 1a-c; W 6; W 7; W 8; SL 1b-d; SL 3; L 4		
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Activities:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>
12 min.	<b>Anticipatory Set:</b> New vocabulary: “Tell me what you think these words mean.” Share selected responses, and then provide students with the accurate definitions.	Vocabulary Handout (See Figure 3.)
10 min.	Review previous day’s end-of-class assignment; Ask students to elaborate and “explain the examples they provided at the end of class yesterday. How were these characters or people portrayed?”	Smartboard; examples of student submissions from previous lesson’s ticket- out-the-door exercise; discussion
20-25 min.	Break class into groups of 4 or 5 students; have students brainstorm ideas that helps answer their essential question; check that students have correctly identified and noted relevant information before allowing them to proceed  For research and homework, remind students that their essential question can provide the keywords for an internet search.	Collaborate/Brainstorm Handout (See Figures 4 and 5.)
<b>Assessment:</b> On the second day of the unit, students will complete their predictions and verbally share their suggestions (formal and informal) and effectively collaborate in group decision making (informal). The homework, which is to be autonomously completed, will be assessed (formal).  <b>Accommodations:</b> Use of assistive technology where applicable; integrating technology; group work; scaffolding instruction of new terminology		

Table 2. Lesson Plan – Day 2.

# Predict ...

... Provide your best guess as to what these words or phrases mean. Don't worry, there is no wrong answer! Write your responses in the spaces provided.

**1. Ableism**

Your definition: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**2. Able-Body**

Your definition: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**3. Anti-Disablist**

Your definition: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

.

**4. Realism:**

Your definition: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. Supercrip:**

Your definition: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3. Vocabulary Handout.

## Collaborate ...

... based on yesterday's and today's class discussions, you and your group members will be given one of the following essential questions to analyze for your project:

1. How do representations (or misrepresentations) of disability influence public perception?
2. How can depicting the actions of a person with a disability as heroic be patronizing?
3. Are people with disabilities to be pitied?
4. Why are the implications for vilifying characters with disabilities in literature and media?
5. Why should we care about media and literature representations of disability?

**When you and your group members have been given an essential question to explore, circle it, and brainstorm together below and on the opposite side of this handout.**

## Brainstorm ...

... Now, on the space provided below, right down the essential question you and your group members have been given, and then complete the opposite side of this page.

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*Figure 4.* Collaborate/Brainstorm Handout.

## Brainstorm (Continued) ...

Next, brainstorm examples of literature and media that relate to your essential question and connect the examples with the new vocabulary you learned today. Use your brilliant minds and your laptops to further investigate and research. In addition to literature, consider television, news headlines, and movies. Hint: Conduct a web search for “disability” + “media” + “misconceptions” + “prejudice” to get started—you get the idea!

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### Homework!

Each group member is to find two sources or examples that depict or conflict with your group’s stance on your essential question. You must come to class tomorrow with your two sources identified, and be ready to verbally explain—in detail—how these sources connect to your group’s idea. If you don’t have access to a computer to conduct your research, ask a parent or family member for ideas. Write your ideas below:

1.

---

2.

---

Figure 5. Collaborate/Brainstorm Handout; Side 2.

<b>The Pitiful Bellringer Researching &amp; Planning</b>		<b>Class: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English</b> <b>Date: Days 3 &amp; 4</b>
<b>Objectives</b> Students will: 1. Analyze, question, and discuss media portrayal of disability 2. Share and defend their individual research 3. Explore topics dealing with different cultures or viewpoints 4. Collaborate on preparing their final assessment		
<b>Common Core Standards</b> RI 1; RI 4; RI 6; RI 7; RI 9a; W 2a-b; W 6; W 7; SL 1a-d; SL 2		
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Activities:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>
7 min.	<b>Anticipatory Set:</b> Headlines; inquire if students know who Oscar Pistorius is, and then ask, “Why is he being called a ‘hero’ or ‘superman’? Are the writers of these news articles putting the disability before the man, or the other way around?”	Smartboard/Headline images (See Images 1 and 2.)
10 min.	Introduce and read directions for research guidelines/questions and presentation rubric; further explain the process of analysis and research	Planning Handout (See Figure 6.)
30 min.	Break into groups for presentation preparation; provide scaffolded guidelines for presentation outline/preparation; explain that in this class students will compare the research they have gathered from various sources; check students’ scaffolds	Presentation Rubric (See Figure 7.)  Homework; Planning Handout; laptops; printers; presentation materials
<b>Day 4</b>		
45 min.	Group work: students will spend entire class period preparing and finalizing their presentations.  Students will continue to collaborate and cooperate; observe students’ progress and provide ongoing feedback and guidance especially for those who need encouragement	laptops; printers; presentation materials
<b>Assessment:</b> On the third and fourth day of the unit, students will complete their outlines, planning and preparation of the presentation (informal) and effectively collaborate in group decision-making (informal).  <b>Accommodations:</b> Use of assistive technology where applicable; integrating technology; group work; scaffolding research methodologies		

Table 3. Lesson Plan – Days 3 and 4.



Image 1.

The image is a screenshot of a news article from 'The Independent'. The logo at the top left features an eagle and the word 'INDEPENDENT' in red. A navigation bar contains various categories like NEWS, VOICES, SPORT, TECH, LIFE, PROPERTY, ARTS &amp; ENTS, TRAVEL, MONEY, INDYBEST, and B. Below that, there are dropdown menus for UK, World, Business, People, Science, Environment, Media, Technology, Education, Obituaries, Diary, and Correction. The article title is 'Oscar Pistorius: Blade Runner goes from hero to hunted as he's freed on bail after marathon hearing', with 'hero' circled in red. The sub-headline reads: 'Pistorius is ordered to hand over firearms and passports, avoid his home and all witnesses in the case, report to police twice a week and not to drink alcohol'. The author's name 'DANIEL HOWDEN' and the date 'SATURDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2013' are visible at the bottom. There are also social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Google+.

Image 2.

# Plan ...

**Your Essential Question:**

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**Hook:** What is intriguing about this question? Hook your readers with an interesting fact that might make them curious about this topic. Show your fact with pictures, if applicable.

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**Analysis:** We found (#) of main ideas about (our topic): (List main ideas)

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**Conclusion:**

What is your response/opinion to the essential question? Give the facts that support your response/opinion:

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Your group presentation must be between four and five minutes.

Figure 6. Planning Handout.

Directions: Use the following as a guide for your presentation.

<b>Guidelines for Group Presentations</b>					
	<b>4 Exemplary</b>	<b>3 Accomplished</b>	<b>2 Developing</b>	<b>1 Beginning</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>Organization &amp; Argument</b>	The audience clearly understands the argument; presentation is logical and enables the listener to see, hear, feel, or think about the subject in a new way	The audience clearly understands the argument; presentation is logical and enables the listener to see, hear, feel, or think about the subject – but NOT in a new way	The argument could be more clearly stated; word choice is predictable	The argument is not apparent; does not enable the audience to see, hear, feel, or think about the subject	
<b>Imagery</b>	Incorporates relevant images that evoke a powerful response	Incorporates images that align with the argument, but could be more relevant	Incorporates images, but they need some explanation	Use of images is basic and needs lengthy explanation	
<b>Speech &amp; Language</b>	Vocabulary is precise and vivid; speakers understand the topic and speak clearly and with conviction	Vocabulary is routine and workable; diction is clear; speakers understand the topic	Vocabulary is more telling than showing; diction could be elevated and more convincing	Use of vocabulary is basic; audibly hard to understand and decipher at times	
<b>Language Conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation)</b>	Uses 9 <sup>th</sup> -grade-level spelling, grammar, and punctuation; contains few, if any, errors that do not hinder comprehension	Has mainly grade-level spelling, grammar, and punctuation; contains some errors that do not hinder comprehension	Contains many errors that may impede the audience's understanding	Contains frequent errors that impede the audience's understanding	
<b>Effort</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the assignment and goes beyond the requirements	Demonstrates an understanding of the assignment	Demonstrates some understanding of the assignment	Lacks understanding of the assignment	

Figure 7. Presentation Rubric.

<b>The Pitiful Bellringer Final Presentations</b>		<b>Class: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English</b> <b>Date: Day 5</b>
<b>Objectives</b> Students will: 1. Participate in a collaborative presentation 2. Respond (verbally) to questions that relate to the topic 3. Collaborate on preparing their final assessment		
<b>Common Core Standards</b> RI 1; RI 7; W 1e; W 9a; SL 1a-e; SL 2-5; L 1		
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Activities:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>
40 min.	<b>Presentations:</b> Five to six group presentations; approximately 5 min. in length each with time allotted for questions from the audience	Presentation materials
5 min.	Ticket-out-the-door/homework: Revisit Anticipation Guide; self-reflection to be completed as homework	Anticipation Guide (See Figure 1.)
<b>Assessment:</b> On the final day of this unit, students will be assessed on their presentation (formal) and their homework, which will be the completion of the Anticipation Guide (formal).		
<b>Accommodations:</b> Use of assistive technology where applicable; options for electronic discussion, if applicable		

*Table 4. Lesson Plan – Day 5.*

## Chapter 4

### Conclusions and Recommendations

English Language Arts teachers have a unique opportunity (and responsibility) to help students explore how literature and media shapes our reality. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that prevalent usage of certain words, such as “retard” or “cripple” are supremely derogatory, hurtful, and unacceptable (Siperstein & Pociask, 2010); instead, inquiry, discussion, and learning must center upon what the allegorical representations in media and literature imply. After all, a person is only disabled with respect to the environment in which they are placed or the language that is used to define them, and students need to be given the tools to heighten their awareness around this fact.

The use of disability as a character trait or implied infliction is irresponsible and reinforces negative attitudes toward disabilities. As a result of the seemingly innocuous media and literature representations, the disability subsequently defines the person—not the other way around. Progress in media is being made, but more pressure and activism from disability-advocacy organizations is necessary to further the agenda.

The most important and positive efforts to end these stereotypes in media arise from simple dialogue and discourse, as outlined herein. Organizations such as the Entertainment Industries Council and the Special Olympics have held national conferences in which members of both communities come together to discuss what needs to change to increase awareness. These recommendations and methods have, at their core, three goals that aim to effectively extinguish ongoing prejudices and

misconceptions that are perpetuated by popular culture. Members of the media are being asked to: “(1) dispel fears, stereotypes, and offensive and hurtful slurs; (2) promote subtle inclusion and seamless integration of people with intellectual disabilities in film and TV; and (3) expand the definition of diversity beyond race and culture to include intellectual disabilities” (EIC-SOI Report, 2007, p. 5).

The Easter Seals organization, which has been assisting and advocating for people with special needs since 1919, has gone to great lengths to champion for the rights of people with disabilities. The organization promotes awareness by dispelling myths about disability and providing etiquette, including standards for how people with disabilities should be portrayed in media. The guidelines they created emphasize that in order for there to be a change in societal perception, we have to rethink the way we write and create images when portraying people with disabilities in the media. The organization presents details regarding appropriate terminology, interviewing etiquette, and guidelines for writing about disabilities. The essence of the checklist, however, is summed up in the following sentiment: “Omit mention of an individual’s disability unless it is pertinent to the story” (National Center on Disability and Journalism, as cited by Riley, 2005). Thusly, author and magazine editor-in-chief, Charles Riley, employed strict rules for his staff writers when profiling a person with a disability: “I specifically instructed my writers to confine the cause of disability to the last third of the article (if it was noted at all) while foregrounding the current career or achievements of the subject and following with the color and quotes that would affirm the *life* part of living with a disability” (Riley,

p. 54). Adjustments to how disability is presented, such as the aforementioned, are small, yet powerful shifts in the disability paradigm.

Another trend in developing awareness (and because acceptance and the alleviation of bias cannot be achieved without accurate representation) organizations such as Inclusion in the Arts & Media of People with Disabilities (IAMPAD) are adding extra pressure to the inclusion agenda in an attempt to alter the prevailing hegemony. IAMPAD, which is a civil rights campaign seeking “equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities throughout the entertainment and news media” (IAMPAD, 2010), encourages supporters to take action via awareness events, campaigns, and legislative support. IAMPAD also works closely with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and the Actor’s Equity Association (AEA) to enact change in media by increasing accurate visibility (via employing actors with disabilities) and therefore lessening public misconceptions of disability.

Making progress takes time, however. Shifting perception takes time, too. The most immediate benefit arises from empowering students to question what they’re being fed by popular culture and literature, which is the aim and intentional goal of the enclosed unit plan. The following tongue-in-cheek witticism—if one were to read ‘unreasonable’ as one who questions conventions—perfectly exemplifies this reality: “Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable

people” (George Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950). If that statement is true, then let us all be “unreasonable people,” each and every one.

## References

Beckett, A., Ellison, N., Barrett, S., & Shah, S. (2010). Away with the fairies? Disability within primary-age children's literature. *Disability & Society, Vol. 25, No. 3, May 2010, 373-386.*

This article dissects the research from a one hundred-book-sample of children's literature prevalent in many UK schools. The researchers aimed to uncover how disabilities and inclusion are portrayed in this popular media. The data shows that portrayals (in terms of word choice, stereotypes, characterization, etc.) have improved—particularly in the past 30 years—yet there is still much work to be done in regards to how people with disabilities are unintentionally discriminated against in literature.

Bushell, D. L. (Producer) & Thornton, B. B. (Director). (1996). *Sling Blade* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.

This movie follows the life of a man with a disability upon being released from a psychiatric hospital. As he reenters society, the protagonist befriends and becomes entrenched in the lives of a family with dysfunctional and abusive characters. This source was selected for its implication that people born with cognitive differences have the potential for unpredictable, murderous behavior.

Cieply, M. (2008, August 10). Nationwide ‘Thunder’ boycott in the works. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/11/movies/11thun.html>

This article describes formal complaints and planned protests and boycotts to the impending opening of the film “Tropic Thunder.” Sources within the article state that the public backlash is warranted because the obvious offences to a variety of groups have never been greater.

Cornfeld, S. (Producer) & Stiller, B. (Director). (2008). *Tropic thunder* [Motion picture]. United States: Dreamworks.

This movie has several plots within a plot, but predominantly follows the filming of an action movie replete with clichéd Hollywood actor types. The source was chosen for its derogatory representation of minorities and people with disabilities.

Disability goes Hollywood. (2009). *Momentum (19403410)*, 2(2), 27–27.

This brief article discusses how several Hollywood labor unions are joining forces to employ more actors with disabilities. This article highlights one television actor, Robert David Hall, who is not only one of the few “visible” people with a disability on network television, but he’s also the chair for the Tri-Union Performers with Disabilities Committee.

Entertainment Industries Council & Special Olympics (2007). Picture this:

Intellectual disabilities [Report]. Retrieved from:

<http://www.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/EIC-SOI%20report.pdf>

This publication, which was jointly produced by the EIC and Special Olympics focuses on ways to dismantle prejudice and increase awareness and understanding toward people with intellectual disabilities. This source was chosen for its description of the two organizations stances on representing people with disabilities in media.

Hardin, M. M. & Hardin, B. (2004). The ‘supercrip’ in sport media: Wheelchair athletes discuss hegemony’s disabled hero. *Sociology of Sport Online*.

Retrieved from: [http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v7i1/v7i1\\_1.html](http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v7i1/v7i1_1.html)

This article discusses the “supercrip” model of how many people with disabilities are portrayed in the media. This source was selected for its insight into the story of Erik Weihenmayer, who was the first person with a visual impairment to ever reach the summit of Mount Everest.

Hehir, T. (2005). *New Directions in Special Education: Eliminating Ableism in Policy and Practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

This source provides tremendous insight into the current state and future of special education. Hehir draws special attention to how cultural attitudes shape perspective as well as institutional practices. Hehir’s stance on the importance of fostering good citizenship (and the development of social

relationships) is an important role of schools, and a legitimate means toward alleviating underlying prejudice.

Howden, D. (2013, February 23). Oscar Pistorius: Blade Runner goes from hero to hunted as he's freed on bail after marathon hearing. *The Independent*.

Retrieved: March 28, 2013 from <http://www.independent.co.uk>.

This article discusses the latest development in the impending trial of world famous athlete and accused murderer, Oscar Pistorius. This source was used for the verbiage of its heading.

Johnson, J. K. (2008). The visualization of the twisted tongue: Portrayals of stuttering in film, television, and comic books. *Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 41, No. 2, April 2008, 245-261*.

This article acknowledges the slow increase of accurate representations of mental and physical disabilities in entertainment, yet contends one disability is still ignored: stuttering. Stuttering, the author argues, is always portrayed as being linked to stereotypes such as nervousness or weakness, and subsequently, rarely give a character the opportunity to be shown in a well-rounded light.

McPhail, J. C., & Freeman, J. G. (2005). Beyond prejudice: Thinking toward genuine inclusion. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, Vol. 20, No. 4, 254-267*.

This article examines how centuries'-old ideologies defined disability as a "weakness" or "deficiency", and how these hegemonies still shape some

educational practices today. True inclusion, the authors argue, cannot be achieved without uncovering the root of these ideologies. This source was selected for its historical information regarding the “medical model” view of disabilities.

Meyer, G. (Writer) & Kirkland, M. (Director). (1999, Oct. 3). Brother’s little helper [Television series episode] In M. Scully (Producer), *The Simpsons*. Los Angeles: Fox.

This episode satirizes America’s obsession with medicating children as a solution to (what is often) typical adolescent behavior. In this instance, Bart’s rebellious nature is reprimanded with a prognosis of Attention Deficit Disorder and a prescription for a drug that turns Bart into a paranoid conspiracy theorist.

Nankin, M., Ettinger, B. & Rosenthal, R. (Producers). (1989-1993). Life goes on [Television series]. Burbank, CA: Columbia/Warner Bros.

This television series centers on the trials and joys of an average American middle-class family. One of the family members, the son, was born with Down syndrome, and prompts the family members to be his biggest advocates. The source was chosen because not only does the plot and storyline embody inclusion, but the series represents accurate portrayals of disabilities: the actor playing the son has Down syndrome in real life.

Pardun, C. J. (2004). Changing attitudes changing the world: Media's portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities. *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.

This policy paper, which was issued by the Special Olympics, features a study conducted by Pardun, which examines nearly 4,000 movie and television scenes, as well as news-related media, for their depictions of people with intellectual disabilities.

Puig, C. (2008, August 12). Protestors find no humor in 'Tropic Thunder'. *USA Today*. Retrieved from: [http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-08-12-tropic-protests\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-08-12-tropic-protests_N.htm)

This online article covers the protests that were in response to the film "Tropic Thunder," and the film's offensive and prejudicial content that is cloaked under the guise of satire. This source was used for its statistics related to the number of times derogatory terms were used in the film.

Riley, C. A. (2005). *Disability and the media: prescriptions for change*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England,.

Dissects media coverage of disability and provides anecdotal guidelines for media including how to report about people with disabilities, appropriate terminology, and etiquette to be followed when interviewing people with disabilities.

Shapiro, J.P. (1993). *No Pity: People With Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movements*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

This book chronicles society's view of overcoming disability, or the desire of wishing it away. Shapiro's research delves into the historical elements that have led to this prevailing belief, and reports on how people with disabilities must demand not only equal access, but equal acceptance because a disability is only a part of a person; it does not define them.

Siperstein, G. N., Pociask, S. E., & Collins, M. A. (2010). Sticks, stones, and stigma: A study of students' use of the derogatory term "retard." *Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities, Vol. 48, No. 2, April 2010*, 126-134.

This study was part of a campaign to inform the public on the hurtful implications of derogatory vernacular. The study investigates the high rate of which students surveyed have used, or have heard, the "R-word."

Stone, M. & Parker, T. (Writers and Directors). (2003, March 26). Krazy kripples [Television series episode] In F. Agnone (Producer), *South Park*. Los Angeles: Comedy Central.

This controversial television episode satirizes society's creation of the "super-crip" as well as the cultural belief that disabilities are afflictions that need to be pitied and cured. The show's creators parody the efforts of Christopher Reeve and his attempts at finding a cure.

Storey, K. (2007). Combating ableism in schools. *Preventing School Failure, Vol. 52, No. 1, Fall 2007, 56-58.*

This article discusses the unintentional implications of living in a society that values able-bodiedness over disability, and how those values manifest as superiority. The author offers suggestions for combating ableism in schools, such as incorporating disability awareness into the curriculum via role models, literature, and representation (hiring teachers with disabilities).

*Time Magazine* [cover image]. (2013). Retrieved, March 28, 2013 from:  
<http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20130311,00.html>.

This source was selected solely for the implication of its cover image and choice of headline wording. The accompanying cover story details the rise and fall of an Olympic athlete.

Trent, J.W., Jr. (1998). Defectives at the World's Fair: Constructing disability in 1904. *Remedial and Special Education, Vol. 19, No. 4, July/August 1998, 201-211.*

This article examines how people with disabilities or minorities were treated as a spectacle at the 1904 World's Fair. This article supports the hegemony surrounding the medical model view of disability.

White, J. (Writer) & Ben-Moshe, L., Cory, R. C., Feldbaum, M., & Sagendorf, K. (Editors) (2005). *Building pedagogical curb cuts: Incorporating diversity in*

*the university classroom and curriculum.* Syracuse, NY: The Graduate School, Syracuse University.