

## **Critical Disability Theory And William Shakespeare**

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### **Abstract**

Disability is a broad term that encompasses physical, mental, and emotional impairments, and can be seen in many different ways throughout literature. The representation of disability in literature is rooted in the attitudes of society at any given time. In some eras, disabilities were seen as a sign of shame; while in other times people with disabilities were celebrated and even seen as special, mystical figures. Here I have tried to explore the representation of disability in English literature from the early modern period to the present day, and will discuss how these representations have changed over time. This paper will explore the various ways in which Shakespeare portrays disability in his works, and how these portrayals can be interpreted in terms of the social and cultural context of his time. The analysis of Hamlet shows how Shakespeare used his characters to explore mental illness, while also portraying mental health issues in a sympathetic and understanding light. The implications of this research are twofold; firstly, it emphasizes the importance of understanding, acceptance and support for disabilities, which is particularly relevant in today's society; secondly, it highlights the importance of continued exploration into the intersection between literature and health.

### **Keywords**

Disability, impairments, Critical Disability Theory, Social Model, Medical Model, deformity etc.

### **Introduction**

The notion of disability has been part of the human consciousness since antiquity. Historically, disabilities were often seen as a sign of weakness or social alienation. The representation of disabilities in literature has evolved over time. Disability in literature has been a topic of discussion for centuries. It has been used to explore themes of identity, power, and oppression. In the past, disability was often used as a metaphor for other forms of oppression, such as racism or sexism. However, in recent years, disability has become a more prominent theme in literature, as authors have begun to explore the experiences of disabled people in a more nuanced and realistic way. From the earliest works of William Shakespeare to modern day authors, disability has been used as a tool to explore the human condition. Disability has been used to explore themes of identity, oppression, and resilience. In Shakespeare's works, disability is often used to explore the power dynamics between characters. In the early modern period, disability was often portrayed as a source of shame and pity. In William Shakespeare's works, characters with disabilities were often portrayed as objects of ridicule and were used to further the plot.

For example, in King Lear, the character of Gloucester is blinded as a punishment. In King Lear, the titular character's blindness is used to explore the themes of power and justice. Lear's blindness is a metaphor for his lack of insight and understanding of the world around him. His blindness serves as a reminder of his own mortality and the fragility of life.

Disability is a broad term that encompasses physical, mental, and emotional impairments, and can be seen in many different ways throughout literature. The representation of disability in literature is rooted in the attitudes of society at any given time. In some eras, disabilities were seen as a sign of shame; while in other times people with disabilities were celebrated and even seen as special, mystical figures. Early works often used disabilities as a form of punishment for moral transgression, such as in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex, where it is suggested that Oedipus's blindness is a direct result of his hubris and moral transgression. Later works, such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, suggests that disabilities can be a sign of a character's strengths and uniqueness. In this work, the monster is viewed as a monster not because of his physical disability, but because he is a result of man's hubris and ambition gone wrong. This essay will explore the representation of disability in English literature from the early modern period to the present day, and will discuss how these representations have changed over time. This paper will explore the representation of disability in English literature particularly in Shakespeare. This paper will explore the various ways in which Shakespeare portrays disability in his works, and how these portrayals can be interpreted in terms of the social and cultural context of his time

### **Critical Disability Theory and Literature**

Critical Disability Theory is an interdisciplinary approach in art and culture and other inquiring disciplines involving humane perspectives. It is also called as Crip Theory. Disability studies is an academic discipline that examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability. Initially, the field focused on the division between "impairment" and "disability", where impairment was an impairment of an individual's mind or body, while disability was considered a social construct. It is a wide-ranging interdisciplinary theory that includes almost every subject ranging from science and humanities, arts and culture, politics and engineering, feminism and queer theories and etc. Critical Disability Theory approaches literature as one providing conception of disability as a spiritual sign- boon or bane- giving way to an understanding of it as pathology, abnormality and error in the humanities and literature. There are categorizations of disabled representation in media, art and literature based upon symbolism, characterizations, and stereotypical narratives— disability as an emblem of evil, as 'monsters', as a loss of one's humanity, as a total dependency and lack of self-determination, as being maladjusted, as a compensation for some other special gift/power and disability leading to courageousness or achievement or disabled as sexual menace. The physical disabilities portrayed in literature typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and/or gross deformity of the body.

### **Definition of Disability**

The World Health Organization defines disability as an "umbrella" term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body structure or function. Activity limitations refer to difficulties an

individual may have in executing activities within given environments, while participation restrictions are difficulties an individual may experience when involved in life situations, such as working or socializing. Disability can have physical and mental constraints, as well as starting from birth or occurring later in life.

### **Social Model of Disability**

One of the most prominent theories of disability in English literature is the social model of disability. This theory suggests that disability is not directly caused by an individual's impairments, but instead it is created by the social structures within which the individual lives. This theory is often expressed in literature by exploring the ways in which the main characters with disabilities are excluded from the social structures in which they live. For example, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the protagonist Celie is disabled in many ways, both physically and mentally. Her disability is a result of her oppressive family and community, and the way they limit her opportunities.

### **Medical Model of Disability**

The medical model of disability suggests that disabilities are caused by an individual's physical or mental impairments, and that the individual's social environment has no significant effect on their disability. This theory is often explored in literature by concentrating on the individual's experience of their disability, rather than the social context in which the disability occurs. The example of boy with autism, crazy lady or mad woman, blindness or disability with handling situations, mental illness, death of near and dear that cause grief and lament to make one disable, nightmare etc. Merry Shelley's *Frankenstein* a ghost story can be read, how the monster is formed, the fate of monster, the experience of monster living with stigma.

### **Cultural Model of Disability**

The cultural model of disability suggests that disability is part of the human experience, and that a person's disability is the result of their culture's values and attitudes towards disabilities. This theory is often explored in literature by focusing on how characters with disabilities are viewed and treated in their cultures. For example, in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist is culturally disabled, and the novel examines the ways in which her disability is regarded in her culture and its impact on her social standing and opportunities.

### **Application of Theory of Disability to the Works of Shakespeare**

The works of William Shakespeare have been studied and analyzed for centuries, and his plays and poems have been interpreted in a variety of ways. One of the most interesting aspects of his works is the way in which he portrays disability. In his plays, disability is often used as a metaphor for other issues, such as social exclusion, powerlessness, and marginalization. Shakespeare's works often portray disability as a metaphor for other issues. It is often used to represent powerlessness, marginalization, and social exclusion. For example, in *King Lear*, the character of Gloucester is blind, and this blindness is used to represent his lack of power and his marginalization from society. Similarly, in *The Tempest*, Caliban is portrayed as a deformed creature, and his deformity is used to represent his exclusion from society.

In addition to using disability as a metaphor for other issues, Shakespeare also uses disability to explore the idea of identity. In his plays, characters with disabilities are often portrayed as having a unique identity, which is distinct from the identities of

those without disabilities. This is seen in the character of Richard III, who is portrayed as a villainous figure, but also as a figure who is capable of great empathy and understanding. Similarly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is portrayed as a villain, but also as a figure who is capable of great compassion and understanding.

Shakespeare's plays and characters address disability in a variety of ways, from tragedy to satire to comedy. Whether it is through the use of humour, or through characters emphasizing the importance of society's acceptance and understanding of disability, disability is a prominent theme in much of Shakespeare's work. One of the earliest references to disability in Shakespeare's works is found in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which there is brief mention of Romeo's physical disability. Romeo is described as being "limp and pale," indicating that he is suffering from some form of physical disability. This physical disability is never addressed in the play, but its presence serves as an underlying reminder of the tragedy and suffering that accompany physical disability. Additionally, Romeo's disability serves to emphasize the importance of the love story between Romeo and Juliet, as it serves as a reminder of the fragility of life.

In addition to physical disability, mental disability is also addressed in Shakespeare's works. *King Lear* is a notable example, as it features a prominent character with a mental disability. Lear is described as being "four score and upward, not an hour more nor less," implying that he is an elderly man suffering from dementia. Throughout the play, Lear's mental disability is presented as a tragic figure, emphasizing the difficulties faced by those with mental disabilities. Additionally, Lear's mental disability serves to emphasize the tragedy of the play, as Lear's own mental state serves to prevent him from making sound decisions, resulting in the suffering of many.

The theme of disability is also addressed in a humorous manner in many of Shakespeare's works. One example is found in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which a character named Falstaff is portrayed as a clumsy and bumbling fool. Falstaff's physical disability is presented comically, serving to bring humour to the play. Additionally, Falstaff's physical disability serves to highlight the importance of maintaining a sense of humour, even in the face of adversity.

Shakespeare's works often discuss the importance of accepting and understanding those with disabilities. In *Othello*, for example, Othello's physical disability is discussed in a sympathetic manner, as his disability is viewed as a minor inconvenience compared to the major issues faced by Othello's society. Additionally, Othello's physical disability serves to emphasize the importance of understanding and embracing those with disabilities, as his disability is seen as an admirable quality rather than a hindrance.

Physical disabilities are featured in many of Shakespeare's works, with characters ranging from fully disabled to those with only a slight physical difference. Shakespeare also includes characters which do not have disabilities but are still affected by them. In the play *King Lear*, the titular character is forced to confront the fact that his youngest daughter Cordelia is blind. He struggles to accept this disability, as it is seen as a sign of her lack of love for him, but ultimately resolves to care for her despite her disability. This demonstrates Shakespeare's ability to write about disability in a way that is both sensitive and realistic.

### **Shakespeare's philosophy on physical disability**

When analysing Shakespeare's works, it is clear that he had a nuanced view of physical disability. As demonstrated above, he was able to write about disability in a way that was neither overly positive nor overly negative, but instead thoughtful and realistic. Shakespeare often uses physical disability as a means of characterization, but he does not necessarily use it to characterize a character as either good or evil. Instead, he uses it to demonstrate the complexity of human nature, as well as the effects that disability can have on a person's life.

Shakespeare also appears to recognize the importance of acceptance and understanding in regards to physical disability. In *King Lear*, the character of Cordelia is treated with kindness and understanding by her father despite her disability, and the other characters in the play are also shown to accept and understand her condition. This demonstrates Shakespeare's willingness to show the importance of accepting physical disability and not judging someone based on their physical appearance.

### **Mental Disabilities in the Works of Shakespeare**

Throughout the works of William Shakespeare, different characters display symptoms of mental disability that can be difficult to identify due to the time period in which he wrote. It is important to explore these characters and the context in which their disability manifests to understand the varying degree of respect or lack thereof for mental disability in Elizabethan England.

Considered by many to be Shakespeare's masterpiece, *King Lear* displays the clear struggles of a mentally disabled king. Throughout the play, Lear experiences a range of emotions, the most dominant being rage, confusion and despair. These emotions, along with his irrational and ill-conceived decisions, portray the complex nature of a man suffering from mental disability. The primary effect of Lear's disability manifested in his increased vulnerability and lack of self-awareness. He was unable to recognize the true character of his two wicked daughters Goneril and Regan and chose to believe their false promises and pledges of loyalty. Furthermore, his tragic end into nothingness and madness showed that, without a strong support network, people suffering from mental disabilities are extremely vulnerable and open to exploitation and abuse.

The success of *King Lear* may be attributed to the audience's perceptions of and reactions to the character of Lear and his disability. Audiences and critics alike have long praised Shakespeare's power over emotions, and *King Lear* provided an example of this. Many responses to *King Lear* and its characters have been positive, with characters such as Edmund being seen as ruthless and unrepentant, while *King Lear* and Cordelia were seen as embodiments of mercy, care and compassion. It could be argued that the audience responded to Lear in particular because he embodied the difficulty and struggle of living with a mental disability. Throughout the play, Shakespeare's plot and character development allow the audience to feel the pain, sorrow, and helplessness that both Lear and those supporting him suffer due to the disability.

Furthermore, modern adaptations of the play have sought to bring to light the ingrained prejudices in Shakespeare's play, which further heightens audience sympathy for Lear and increases awareness of mental disabilities in the Elizabethan era. For example, in the 2003 adaptation starring Kenneth Branagh, some of the creative decisions take place outside of the written script, such as having an actor playing the role of an arms

bearer, effectively highlighting the lack of autonomy of those with mental disabilities. This allows the audience to more readily recognise and sympathise with Lear and the effects of his disability.

It is important to note that the response to mental disability in the works of Shakespeare was not always positive. For example, in *Macbeth*, two characters with mental disabilities serve as a direct juxtaposition to Macbeth in order to highlight the macabre wickedness of his actions. Both the old man and ‘the innocent’ are seen as innocent and helpless individuals who are, in comparison to Macbeth’s unquenchable ambition and purposeful homicide, in great need of protection. The fact that the ‘innocent’ is about to be killed for Macbeth’s benefit shows both a disregard for and an exploitation of those with mental disabilities in a way that does not provoke empathy from the audience nor from those in the play itself; on the contrary, these acts of violence against them are necessary for the plot to continue.

### **The Representation of Mental Disability in Hamlet**

William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* has long been debated and studied for its complex characters and its intricate plot. This play’s enduring influence across the centuries is not only attributed to its narrative but also the moral issues it raises. *Hamlet* is the story of a young man’s search for justice and revenge, themes that remain relevant even in today’s world. However, what has been less explored is the representation of mental disabilities in the play. *Hamlet* is also renowned for being a classic example of the “tragic hero”; a figure of nobility who is driven to make wrong decisions from his flaws and experiences hardships as a result. Many of the issues surrounding *Hamlet*’s actions and behaviour have been the subject of a great deal of speculation, and it is now accepted that the character is likely suffering from an array of mental disorders.

*Hamlet* is a tragic hero who is dealing with a deep wound that cannot be healed through physical means. This inner pain can be seen as a metaphor for mental disability, as it affects his interactions with the people in his life, and the decisions he makes. *Hamlet* is presented as an outsider in the court of Denmark, for he does not conform to the expectations of his rank and station. His own sense of morality is in direct opposition to that of the court, and this is further highlighted by his perceptions of beheading, commending suicide and questioning the power of Claudius.

*Hamlet* also displays his mental disability in his dealings with Ophelia. His outrageous behaviour and words towards her are seen as a sign of his mental instability, as it is clear that he is punishing her for no reason and displaying behaviours that are quite unusual. Such actions are further seen when *Hamlet* kills Polonius accidentally, thinking he is Claudius. Through these moments, it is clear that his inner turmoil and anger affect his judgement and his ability to control himself.

The character of Claudius is equally as complex and adds a further layer of moral ambiguity to the play. He is portrayed as a manipulative character who is willing to use any means to get what he wants, and it is likely that much of his behaviour is driven by a mental disability that is never discussed in the play. It is clear, for instance, that he is terrified of losing his newfound power, and this fear drives many of the decisions he makes. This fear has profound implications on the choices he makes and it is likely that this fear is rooted in a mental disability.

These ambiguities presented in both Claudius and Hamlet's characters demonstrate how mental disability can be an integral part of the play. Through their mental disabilities, these characters are often pushed to extremes in their search for justice and revenge, and ultimately, this leads to the tragedy of the play's conclusion.

### **Effects and Consequences of Isolation and Disabilities in Shakespeare's Hamlet**

Throughout Hamlet, Shakespeare conveys the effects of disabilities on the characters in a variety of ways. By exploring the physical and psychological effects of disabilities, Shakespeare highlights the enduring consequences of isolation. Prince Hamlet, for example, has a physical disability in the form of a cloven hoof which has a marked effect on his relationships with those around him. Not only does it isolate him from other characters, but it also alienates him from himself by causing him to doubt his own capabilities and his identity. This in turn leads to a sense of self-doubt which further isolates him from others and from himself.

Ophelia is another character in Hamlet whose physical disability has a marked effect on her relationships with both Prince Hamlet and her father, Polonius. While her father's death ultimately serves as a metaphor for the isolation of disabilities, it is also representative of how physical disabilities can isolate someone from those around them. This is reflected in Ophelia's own relationship with Hamlet, as her physical disability causes her to feel isolated and inferior to him, leading her to doubt his feelings for her.

Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is also affected by her physical disability which serves to isolate her from those around her. Gertrude's disability is a result of her age, and she is often seen as frail and vulnerable due to her limited physical abilities. This limits her ability to take action and shape her own destiny, and it serves to limit her interaction with both Hamlet and the other characters in the play. The isolation of disabilities experienced by Gertrude affects her relationships with those around her, particularly with Hamlet, as she is often too weak to act or intervene in order to protect him from harm.

Shakespeare also conveys the effects of psychological disabilities on the characters in Hamlet. This is particularly prevalent in the character of Hamlet, who suffers from depression and anxiety due to his experience of his father's death. This serves to further isolate him from his peers and his family by causing him to doubt his own identity, capabilities and relationships.

### **The issue of Discrimination In Hamlet**

Shakespeare also uses his characters to explore the issue of discrimination against those with disabilities in the sixteenth century. Prince Hamlet's disability causes him to be viewed by his peers as a 'freak' and he is ostracised by his community. He is also the butt of jokes and ridicule due to his disability, and this further serves to isolate and alienate him from his peers. Ophelia's disability likewise causes her to be seen as an outsider and she is discriminated against due to her physical impairment. Gertrude's disability causes her to be seen as weak and frail, and she is often ridiculed and patronised by those around her. She is also unable to take any action to protect her son from harm due to her limited physical capabilities. Through the characters of Hamlet, Gertrude and Ophelia, Shakespeare conveys the effects and consequences of isolation of disabilities. He shows how a physical or psychological disability can serve to alter and limit an individual's relationships with those around them and ultimately, lead to their isolation. Furthermore, he also reveals how discrimination can be a major factor in the isolation of

disabilities. Ultimately, while isolation of disabilities is a common theme in Hamlet and presents a challenge to the characters and the audience, it also provides a platform to discuss issues of discrimination and to celebrate the strength and courage of those with disabilities

### **Conclusion**

Disability is an integral part of the human experience and is a concept that has been explored extensively in the English literature. Throughout history, the representation of disability has been closely tied to the attitudes of society. However, modern literature is beginning to challenge these attitudes and explore different aspects of disability. The three theories of disability outlined in this paper – the social, medical, and cultural models – all have interesting ways in which they can be used to explore disability in literature.

Disability has been used in literature to explore the human experience in a variety of ways. It has been used to challenge societal norms, to create a sense of empathy and understanding, and to explore the complexities of the human condition. Disability is a prominent theme throughout the works of William Shakespeare. Whether it is through tragedy, satire, or comedy, disability is often discussed in a variety of ways, emphasizing the importance of understanding and accepting those with disabilities. Shakespeare's works often portray disability as a metaphor for other issues, such as powerlessness, marginalization, and social exclusion. In addition, disability is also used to explore the idea of identity, and characters with disabilities are often portrayed as having a unique identity, which is distinct from the identities of those without disabilities. Through his works, Shakespeare provides a unique insight into the social and cultural context of his time, and his portrayals of disability can be interpreted in terms of the social and cultural context of his time. Shakespeare's works serve as a reminder that disability should not be seen as an obstacle, but rather as a unique feature of an individual's life. Through his works, Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of understanding and embracing all individuals, regardless of their physical or mental disabilities. The analysis of Hamlet's mental disabilities shows how Shakespeare used his characters to explore mental illness, while also portraying mental health issues in a sympathetic and understanding light.

### **Implications for the modern day**

Shakespeare's works can still be relevant to the modern day, particularly in regards to his views on physical disability. He was able to write about physical disabilities in a way that was neither overly positive nor negative, but instead thoughtful and realistic. His emphasis on acceptance and understanding demonstrates his willingness to portray physical disability in a respectful and compassionate manner. As such, his views on disability can still be relevant and applicable to the modern day, and can serve as an example of how disability should be portrayed in literature and art.

The implications of this research are twofold; firstly, it emphasizes the importance of understanding, acceptance and support for those with mental disabilities, which is particularly relevant in today's society; secondly, research such as this highlights the importance of continued exploration into the intersection between literature and health. His approach to writing about disability can be seen as an example of how disabilities should be portrayed in literature and art today. His emphasis on understanding and acceptance is also a reminder of the importance of treating those with physical disabilities with respect and compassion.



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