Hidden in Plain Sight: Disability Represented in Literature

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In recent years, thanks to progressive movements and efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable society, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of proper representation within disability literature. However, many works still fall short of accurately depicting the experiences of individuals with disabilities. By applying various structuralist principles to the analysis and creation of disability narratives, everyone can work towards a more authentic and diverse representation of disability in literature. Through this paper, literature containing disabled narratives are analyzed through a structuralist focus to help identify and challenge the limitations of traditional disability narratives, while also better understanding the significance of authentic representation. Through this analysis of various academic articles and themes surrounding disabled lives, we will ultimately lead to a more inclusive and representative set of guidelines for future literary works, and pave the way for meaningful change in the way we tell and interpret stories of disability.

Disability studies is a vast field of study that examines the social, cultural, and political aspects of disability. It seeks to understand how disability is constructed and represented in society, and how disabled individuals navigate their experiences in a world that is not always accommodating or inclusive. Disability studies then present a significant role in today's society as they challenge traditional notions of normalcy and question the assumptions and stereotypes that often underlie portrayals of disability in literature and other forms of media. Within literature, disability remains a recurring theme, for better or worse. Many disabled characters serve as symbols of marginalization, vulnerability, or inspiration. Disabled characters are also often considered symbols of hidden evil or wrongness. These characters are meant to use the "'deformed' outer body to reflect the 'deformed' inner qualities of [the] characters" (Margolis & Shapiro 19). In doing this, disabled characters are treated as allegories or plot devices, rather than as real people with honest depictions of their lives. Some examples of this include the character Captain Hook in Peter Pan. Captain Hook's disability – his prosthetic hook – is used to support his villainous identity. The hook prosthesis – along with other allegories (like peg legs, eyepatches, etc.) – are often used to depict pirate characters to represent wicked appearances and a villainous character in classical stories.

Another prime example of this is seen in Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883). When Long John Silver is introduced as a nonevil character, "there is only a casual mention of his wooden leg. Later, however, as his treachery is revealed, references to his 'timber' leg became more pronounced" (Margolis & Shapiro 20). This method of authors using characters as literary devices or allegories rather than complex and nuanced characters has been used in literary history to create many negative portrayals of disabled characters, thus pushing more negative thoughts toward disabled people. Additionally, classical literature is beheld to a high level. Due to their history and rich cultural influence, many appreciate and respect these tales. This in turn makes it more difficult to change any negative views created by these stories, with many

growing up unconsciously building their own beliefs towards disabled people off these literary portrayals. However, rather than ban or limit access to classical literature, it is instead much more important that new literature properly represents disability. Educators must address misinformation and misimpressions so that people can discuss and explain these stories in a way that the "damaging messages are negated" (Shapiro 21). With the efforts of the modern day, disability studies as a sector of research has managed to evolve and grow in its goal of authentic disability representation and understanding.

This shift towards more authentic disability representation in narratives has been a welcome development, as it allows disabled readers to see themselves reflected in literature in a more meaningful and respectful way. Now, many work together to shift the trend for honest representation to reveal true disabled living, whether it be through analyzing classic literary works or by encouraging writers to share their experiences in future literature. It is imperative that as humans, we promote and move forward on the path of progress to help make civilization a more inclusive and welcoming one. By analyzing different literary works such as Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon and Naoki Higashida's The Reason I Jump that contain narratives of disability – whether autobiographical in nature or to spread awareness – the importance of honest disability literature is explored and supported.

One way in which authors can achieve more authentic disability representation in their writing is by drawing on the tools of sociolinguistics and narratology. Sociolinguistics is the study of how language is used in social contexts, and how language shapes and reflects social identities and relationships in a community. The field of sociolinguistics concerns itself with identifying linguistic features used in varying situations and understanding how those features reflect the different social relationships and 'characteristics' that one may end up presenting themselves as. For example, different influences on vocabulary, grammar, and syntax can reflect "such factors as age, sex, education, occupation, race, and peer-group identification, among others" (Britannica). An example of analysis through sociolinguistics can be found within Barbara Fennell and John Bennett's article "Sociolinguistic Concepts and Literary Analysis," which aims to serve as a model for and encourage further academic use of the analytical method. Within the article, they use sociolinguistics to analyze the text A Confederacy of Dunces, where the main character, Ignatius J. Reilly, believes that he is surrounded by a town of 'dunces.' Within the novel, Ignatius linguistically isolates himself from this community; the authors write, "his linguistic exile is self-imposed and serves to reinforce the differences he perceives between himself and the 'dunces' around him…Ignatius often deliberately seeks to control people through his language" (374). In the case of Keyes' Flowers for Algernon, this can be seen in how the main character is also linguistically isolated from his community, but rather than it being his choice, it is instead imposed on him by society's expectations of intelligence. In this comparison, we can see Ignatius' attempts to control being common within other works, whether for better or worse. In the case of disability literature, sociolinguistics can be used to not only analyze existing works and verify their use of linguistics to help or harm the disabled image, but also be used by authors to create profound themes within their works through linguistics. Authors can

thus learn to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or perpetuating ableist attitudes by paying attention to the language they use to describe disabled characters. For example, authors can avoid using overly sentimental or inspiring language, in addition to referring to negative stereotypes, to describe disabled characters, and instead focus on depicting their experiences with honesty and empathy. Compared to other literary analysis tools often used within the literary field, sociolinguistics is a smaller field, but it is rapidly growing more dominant thanks to its unique structuralist perspective. Furthermore, in working with other structuralist tools, the effects of analysis can be strengthened.

Narratology, as a literary analytical tool, is closely derived from structuralism. It differs from sociolinguistics in that it focuses less on linguistics and the specifics of language, and instead more on 'narrative'. Narratology is the study of narrative structure and the how stories are constructed and interpreted (Brittanica). Similar to how sociolinguistics can be applied to literature, by employing narrative techniques that center the experiences and perspectives of disabled characters, authors can create more nuanced and authentic portrayals of disability in literature. In The Reason I Jump, for example, Higashida employs the use of question-and-answer formatting as well as journal-esque entries and small, short stories interspersed within his novel. These allow for various narratological styles to be implemented and combined to create a complex and unique connection with the author and his experiences with autism. The study of narratology is interesting in that "we all know how to tell narratives more or less well…we have certain intuitions…about what constitutes a narrative and what does not" (Prince 179). Furthermore, people across cultures typically can identify among the same texts "the same given sets of symbols" as narratives or non-narratives (179). Within this field then, the different structures and purposes of narratives are examined. Within Gerald Prince's article "Narrative Analysis and Narratology," narratology is defined:

Narratology not only can provide instruments for the systematic description of all and only narratives, including those that are yet to come or may never come…but it can also help us arrive at many readings of a given narrative and it can provide a starting point for many reflections of value judgments. After all, the narratological description of a particular narrative yields certain conclusions about it….An interpreter or critic could then ask what these traits mean, what they ultimately result from…and how appropriate or effective they are in terms of the overall narrative strategy. (183)

Examples of how this can be done within disability literature include using a first-person narration to convey the internal thoughts and emotions of a disabled character, as seen in Flowers for Algernon, or employing non-linear storytelling (as done in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury) to reflect the complexities of living with a disability. Within this essay, both lenses of sociolinguistics and narratology have been employed to analyze and understand the linguistic inner workings of Keyes' Flowers for Algernon and Higashida's The Reason I Jump, as well as understand that these tools support and create authentic disability representation in their works.

Flowers for Algernon is a short novel written by Keyes in 1966 that tells the story of Charlie Gordon, a man with intellectual disabilities who undergoes an experimental surgery that dramatically increases his intelligence. After the surgery, Charlie quickly becomes a genius. He also obtains the ability to delve into his memories, learning of his past and childhood trauma. Through Charlie's diary entries that formulate the structure of the novel, readers are able to see him come to terms with his abusive mother and family. Charlie spends much of his time reflecting on his identity and desires while realizing the poor treatment of those deemed 'lesser' by the majority, despite his understanding that everyone is "a human being," and should be treated with respect (Keyes 127). He also learns that life as someone "normal" is not as nice and happy as he had believed before his surgery and struggles to see the real behaviours of people.

As Charlie works to fit into his new intelligent life, he becomes haunted by the slow deterioration of Algernon, a lab mouse who underwent the same surgery and showed signs of regression. Charlie realizes his imminent future, and he uses his intelligence to research and confirm, through his study of "The Algernon-Gordon Effect," that his intelligence will regress. He uses his progress reports to document his experiences and newfound knowledge. The novel ends with Charlie returning to his former state and realizing that his brief period of genius was a bittersweet gift.

Flowers for Algernon tackles many topics surrounding human respect and understanding, especially concerning how society treats the disabled community and uses intelligence to measure someone's value or presence. In applying Barbara Fennell and John Bennett's article on sociolinguistics, one can better understand how the novel portrays disability and how the structure of the writing aids in creating a nuanced and realistic representation of intellectual disability. The novel effectively highlights the stigma and discrimination faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities through its word choice and progress reports. Through the first third of the novel, Charlie Gordon is depicted as having poor language skills and a fleeting memory. Fennell and Bennett's article, "Sociolinguistic Concepts and Literary Analysis," explores the various methods readers can apply to their analyses, as well as Charlie's character depiction, to understand "the deeper insights into the relationship between language, society, and culture within the text" (371). These methods range from looking at the language use across characters, language ideologies, to analyzing the linguistically established power dynamics and language variation (such as slang and dialect) (372). Charlie's progress reports start out being written in very basic and broken English, as seen in the first progress report that he writes: "Dr. Strauss says I should rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happins to me from now on" (Keyes 1). What is first evident is the misspelling of several words, including "remember," "happens," "write," and "every." His progress reports also lack appropriate punctuation, with Charlie often omitting the use of proper commas or periods. This lack of diction and syntax is used by the author to show the readers, who are held in the position of reading a real man's progress reports, that this man's intelligence and skills are low. If Keyes had chosen to instead use sophisticated diction, a wide vocabulary, and proper punctuation, the interpretation of Charlie Gordon as a man with an intellectual disability would be misrepresented and warped.

Yet, despite this seemingly negative portrayal, it is also important to note that beneath the poor linguistic writing is a man with a strong work ethic – throughout the book, we are shown how much effort and work Charlie puts in towards his learning; he attended a school almost every day, would often ask people how to spell certain words, and wholeheartedly believed that he could become smarter. It is his motivation that shows not only his character but also the expectations of the society he lives within. This unfortunate truth is explored in Benjamin Fraser's article "On the (In)Visibility of Cognitive Disability." Fraser's article explores the "disproportionately unseen" cognitive disabilities compared to the visibility of physical disabilities (29). Historically, cognitive disabilities have been "invisible in the theoretical, social, and cultural realms" in comparison to the more traceable history and focus on physical disabilities (such as people who are deaf, blind, paralyzed, etc.). Fraser addresses these concerns within his essay, underscoring the "unique properties of" both visual media and literature to spread awareness of cognitive disabilities (47). The cultural and historical influences in the past have been subdued and hidden from view because of the able-bodied gaze that viewed cognitive disabilities as 'madness.' Today, humans can work to undo this invisibility, as the author writes, "I attend to the potential value of cultural representations that make cognitive disability visible; I also assert the materiality of disability experience as made up of both biology/impairment on one hand and aesthetics/culture on the other" (48). Yet, within Charlie's world, the culture of misunderstanding and invisibility is still prevalent. Charlie's intelligence is tied to his status in society, and it is through this that he believes that if he becomes more intelligent, people will like him more, and he will ultimately be happier. Later, though, Charlie learns after his surgery that intelligence is not everything.

In addition to his poor writing, Charlie goes through several misunderstandings in the first section of the story before and soon after his surgery. Within Charlie's second progress report, Charlie describes being taken by a psychologist named Burt to undergo a Rorschach inkblot test. During the test, Charlie is unable to understand the test and see anything other than ink. He tries many times but is unable to picture anything or utilize his imagination. He ends up becoming frustrated by Burt, who tells him that "other people can see pictures in the inkblots" (2). Later, after Charlie has had the surgery and begun to experience intellectual growth, he takes the test again and finds that Burt had said no such thing. His intellectual growth allowed him to better understand reading and writing, but also what others communicated to him. By the end of the progress report, Charlie was still confused by the purpose of the test but was able to successfully see things in the inkblots. But as he writes at the end of the report, "It seems to me that anyone could make up lies about things he didn't really see. How could they know I wasn't making fools of them by saying things I didn't really imagine?" (36).

Although small at first, Charlie's growth gradually gives him the space to contemplate and ponder the world around him. The book subtly has Charlie's language improve slowly after the surgery, with improvements to sentence structure, memory, vocabulary, and punctuation use. It is important to note that before his surgery, as said before, he strived hard to improve his skills,

but due to his poor memory, he would often forget what he learned. This then shows that his intelligence was always there. Regardless of disability, a person's character, personality, and beliefs exist. As Torres writes in his article "Flowers for Algernon: The Veils of Humanity," Charlie is loved because he is good, not so politically or relatively, but "on absolute human terms…Charlie is good because he doesn't have the intelligence to be bad." The goodness or humanity within people is not tied to their intelligence as society would like everyone to believe. Torres' conclusion "makes the good in humanity accessible to all. No great talent, no great intelligence is needed to be good and that is Charlie Gordon's grand lecture for those of us who would otherwise see him as somehow less of a human being" (Torres). Charlie's struggles during the tests and throughout the book tie into how people with intellectual disabilities are often perceived as unintelligent or inferior, less than human, due to their communication difficulties. Charlie himself later sees this when he becomes more intelligent, and the reader sees this as he dives into his memories, with his mother and father misinterpreting much of his thoughts and feelings. As Charlie's intelligence increases, he is able to reflect on how others have treated him in the past, shedding light on the ableist attitudes that exist within society. His new diction and writing style are used to reflect his newly gained intelligence, which can be used to show both that the surgery worked, but also the ways upon which people view signs of intelligence, regardless of the person. Charlie's linguistic evolution not only allows the reader to witness Charlie's transformation firsthand but also highlights the ways in which language is intricately linked to intelligence and societal perception.

On a narratological level, the structure of Flowers for Algernon plays a significant role in creating a compelling representation of intellectual disability. The novel is composed of progress reports written by Charlie, allowing readers to witness his cognitive development firsthand. This format not only conveys the evolution of Charlie's intelligence but also underscores the challenges he faces in navigating a world that is often hostile and unforgiving towards individuals with disabilities. Additionally, the use of diary entries and letters from other characters provides multiple perspectives on Charlie's transformation, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of disability. Through these various narrative voices, the novel explores themes of identity, self-acceptance, and the societal constructs that shape how we perceive and treat people with disabilities. The use of first-person narrative allows for a deep dive into Charlie's thoughts and emotions, humanizing him and showing that intellectual disabilities do not define a person's worth or capabilities. This narrative choice is crucial in challenging stereotypes and showcasing the complexity of individuals with disabilities. This is especially important to consider, knowing that this type of situation is based within science-fiction, as current technology does not have methods to perform such surgeries to raise intelligence. The author's use of this hypothetical scenario can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between those with intellectual disabilities, who cannot represent themselves, and those who are nondisabled and fail to understand the lives of those with intellectual disabilities.

The characters in Flowers for Algernon are manipulated and expressed through language in many ways. In addition, the different narrative choices within the novel impact the expression of the novel itself. The analyses done to understand the ties between intelligence and happiness, representation in media, and bridge the gaps in understanding between able-bodied and disabled people, come together through the power of language. Overall, these analyses conclude that Flowers for Algernon, in its utilization of various tools in its narrative, managed to create a more authentic representation but also a complex and riveting literary experience in the hopes of providing a window for society to view the life of one particular man, Charlie Gordon, and his experiences.

While Keyes' novel presents disability through a fictional and almost sci-fi view, it is also important to consider the real experiences of those with disabilities, especially regarding autobiographical works. The Reason I Jump follows a question-and-answer format throughout most of the story. Written by thirteen-year-old Naoki Higashida, the boy writes about his experiences with autism and answers what he believes are questions he is commonly asked. Throughout the novel, he answers questions about his own body, nature, his struggles with communication, and his hopes that people will treat him and others like him with patience and hope, rather than giving up on them. In addition, the novel includes short stories written by Naoki as his way of working to communicate his emotions and feelings in a world where even speaking is near impossible for him. He writes the novel to reach out to readers and help them understand that he is like them and. He feels emotions and pain and wants to improve and live a fruitful life. The novel pushes readers to feel the pain he and other children with autism do to foster empathy and care towards a group so often misunderstood.

The Reason I Jump provides a unique insight into the experiences of a non-verbal autistic individual, allowing readers to understand the struggles and thoughts of someone who faces communication challenges daily. The novel sheds light on how language and communication are essential tools for human connection and understanding, highlighting the barriers that individuals with disabilities may face in expressing themselves and making themselves understood. Even in providing gestures like waving or motioning someone to come or go, Naoki and others show difficulty, which he attributes to a lack of control:

> We don't even have proper control over our own bodies. Both staying still and moving when we're told to is tricky – it's as if we're remote-controlling a faulty robot. On top of this, we're always getting told off, and we can't even explain ourselves. I used to feel abandoned by the whole world. (30)

With these struggles, it is obvious why the author asks that those who "look in from the outside world" remember that they are people too, who are constantly trying.

Through the questions that Naoki answers in the book, such as "Why do people with autism talk so loudly and weirdly?" and "Why do you line up your toy cars and blocks?", readers are able to gain a better understanding of the behaviors and communication methods of autistic individuals. As seen in Rachel F. Van Hart's article "A Case for the Autistic Perspective in Young Adult Literature," "understanding among different groups of people is fostered by

awareness of each other's perspective[s]" (27). Within Van Hart's article, she explores her experiences in growing up with an autistic brother, and how she and her family have learned that those with autism are to be celebrated, rather than hidden away. She goes on to discuss the vast spectrum that encompasses autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, and how neurotypical people need to learn to understand those with ASD and their struggles, as well as their gifts, and how overall, they are just as much people as everyone else – they merely view the world differently. The article works to explore how texts like The Reason I Jump "serve as a springboard to probing the question of normalcy in the context of disability," and form better awareness (34): "This call for 'neurodiversity' is a call for society to accept and appreciate the unique perspective of the autistic mind, not only for the sake of those with ASD but also for the general betterment of society" (36). Naoki's responses in his novel provide some of these valuable insights into the thought processes and sensory experiences of people with autism, supporting Van Hart's goals of challenging common misconceptions and stereotypes that exist within society. Narratologically, the inclusion of short stories in the novel works to add depth and complexity to Naoki's narrative. These stories serve to amplify the themes of communication, empathy, and human connection that run throughout the book, showcasing the universal desire for understanding and acceptance. Although Naoki expresses that he feels like his voice is not his own, it is through his writing that he is able to communicate and prove that there is someone inside of him who merely struggles to get out.

  The structuralist influence on the short stories in The Reason I Jump underscores the importance of narrative structure in conveying the experiences of individuals with disabilities. By organizing the stories in a coherent and accessible manner, Naoki allows readers to engage with and empathize with the characters, creating a sense of connection and shared understanding. With the Tortoise and the Hare "sequel," Naoki is able to take a popular story and express his isolation and lonely feelings through it. With his other stories, including the prominent "I'm Right Here" story at the end, the author can convey the pain and fears that he, as a child with autism, feels while living in a world that struggles to see him. Through the reader's empathy, one can finally "see" him and others with autism as more than a burden or a nuisance and see that they too have dreams and long for love and friendship. The Reason I Jump offers a powerful exploration of disability in literature, demonstrating the impact and significance of allowing diverse voices to be heard and understood. The novel highlights the importance of communication, empathy, and inclusivity in fostering understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

  One article that also helps to create a better understanding of the minds of those with autism is Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine's article "The Critic as Neurocosmopolite; Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature Can Learn from Disability Studies: Lisa Zunshine in Conversation with Ralph James Savarese." Within their article, Savarese and Zunshine explore the different psychological and physical theories surrounding autism. In addition, they also work with and document the experiences of people living with autism, such as one woman (and writer) named Lucy Blackman. Similar to Naoki, she too is non-verbal and struggles with

communication and expression in society. What they concluded from their interactions with Lucy was that the "'physical actions' of people with autism 'do not necessarily revel [their] thinking abilities.' For instance, if one merely observes Blackman 'from a normate/outsider perspective, her actions can mislead'" (22). The struggles between inner thoughts and the lack of control of the body are explored, and how people's imaginations perceive this disconnect often leads people to believe that those with autism are antisocialites and isolationists (21-22): "What feels, from the inside, like a body that refuses to cooperate with its brain is interpreted, from the outside, as evidence that the 'mind is incapable of thinking' (22). It is through Savarese and Zunshine's article that they explore and conclude that perspectives need to change. The outsider beliefs towards autistic people are as unbased in reality and uncommunicated as they believe autistic people are, which Naoki attempts to change within his novel.

Overall, the way that Naoki formats his novel as a way to directly answer readers' questions, in addition to the narrative and linguistic choices he makes with his short stories and personal thoughts come together to show his aim of reaching out to the world in hopes that he and others can be better understood. It is also up to us to ensure that we reach out to them and work together on mutual understanding and compassion. As mentioned before in Keyes' novel, The Reason I Jump exists as proof that intelligence, or autism, does not make one less human than others, but it is instead how we live our lives with kindness and compassion towards others that make us all human.

One of the most compelling aspects of these novels is their exploration of the relationship between intelligence and happiness. Within Flowers for Algernon, as Charlie gains intelligence, he becomes increasingly isolated from those around him, struggling to maintain relationships and longing for the simplicity of his previous life. This exploration challenges the conventional narrative that equates intelligence with success and happiness, ultimately subverting the traditional trope of the "triumphant" disabled protagonist. This is also seen within many sections of The Reason I Jump, with Naoki exploring how he would remain autistic even if he had the choice to "become normal," because he knows that with autism he can view the world with such beauty and appreciation (Higashida 75). In one of his short stories, he also depicts this with a sequel to the Tortoise and the Hare. The hare wants to race again, and the tortoise begrudgingly agrees. But when the race begins, the hare is so fast that the tortoise slips and falls. The animals help the tortoise go home to rest, and while the hare wins and reaches the finish line, "nobody was waiting but himself" (40). This severed connection between victory, intelligence, or success, and happiness shows readers that the two are not inherently intertwined. Everyone lives uniquely, so the path to happiness must be just as unique. Whether disabled or not, everyone will face struggles and difficulties. Through companionship and camaraderie, people can help to support each other in reaching their own happiness.

Others might say that these works do not help enough to make real change in the world or do not provide an accurate picture of those who live with disabilities. I agree that everyone is unique, and thus it is impossible to find someone who can "paint a picture" that resonates with everyone and reflects their experiences. On the other hand, the significance of these works lies

not in trying to box disabled people in, but in helping their experiences come to light. It is imperative that more people write about their or others' experiences so that people can learn. In a world where, for so many, even communication is often impossible, it is so important that we help them to have the tools and resources that allow for communication and the experience of living as a human being in this world.

In conclusion, both Flowers for Algernon and The Reason I Jump not only tell compelling stories, but they also prompt readers to reflect on their own beliefs and biases surrounding disability representation in literature. In better understanding not only the different views that society holds towards disabled people but also how disabled people take those views and try to live fulfilling lives, readers can take away the lesson of treating all humans with equal respect, and not treating people as lesser for their intelligence. The significance of reaching better communication between peers is also important, as without it, misunderstandings, and problems between people with differing perceptions of the world will not end. Understanding that these people, underneath anything and everything that might obstruct one's "vision," are human beings like everyone else, is an important first step to helping build a more inclusive and caring world.

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