



Comic Relief or Social Commentary? Ethical Dimensions of Humour in Disability Discourse

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Abstract

This research paper outlines the historical portrayal of persons with disabilities in literature. It traces the discriminatory representations of persons with disabilities, which reinforce their reductionist images in society. Traditionally, characters with disabilities were assigned the stereotypical roles such as jesters, villains, or pitiable figures, that deepen the social hierarchies and perpetuate the notion of disability as “otherness.” This paper examines the complex interplay between humor and disability. Humor has been frequently employed as a tool for marginalisation, but its role has gradually evolved. This study details how the emerging discourse of stand-up comedy is beginning to challenge the existing discriminatory narratives about persons with disabilities. Humor allows comedians with disabilities to subvert stereotypes and inform societal perceptions through their unique experiences. Drawing on the scholarship of disability activists like Paul Hunt and Tom Shakespeare, this paper argues that societal discomfort with disability stems from a denial of vulnerability and mortality, which leads to exclusion and ridicule. It also emphasises the importance of the voices of individuals with disabilities in raising awareness and articulating their lived experiences. This paper advocates for a transformative approach that enables persons with disabilities to reclaim their identities. In essence, this research paper reimagines literature as a medium to foster understanding, respect, and inclusivity.

Keywords: Constructive Humour, Disability Humour, Disability Studies, Destructive Humour, Normates.

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Introduction

Persons with disabilities have been employed as stock characters in literature since ancient times. Assuming their disability as a punishment for their past sins, persons with disabilities have been treated with hostility and abandoned by mainstream society. Fabricated myths, anecdotes, jokes, and stories around disability disseminate the stereotypes surrounding the disability of a person. Assigning persons with disabilities roles of jesters, villains, or as pitiable background characters in literary works further perpetuated their reductionist images and reinforced their “otherness.” There exists a thin line between mockery and humour, and this line often gets blurred by the normatesⁱ while ridiculing the “abnormality” of the person with disability. The complex relationship between comedy and disability has endured a long and arduous journey, with persons with disabilities often positioned on the precarious edge of the comic sword to amuse the “normal” public.

Historically, individuals with disabilities have been scapegoats for jokes that devalue and disparage their identities, thus proving how disability can be the “litmus test for evaluating social structure, values and behavior” (Albrecht 73). Paul Hunt, an early disability activist and co-founder of UPIAS, in his research paper “A Critical Condition,” outlines the primary reasons for the antipathy of normates towards persons with disabilities. Hunt explains that a “deformed and paralysed body” reminds humans of their vulnerability as “people do not want to acknowledge what disability affirms—that life is tragic and we shall all soon be dead. . . shying from the disturbing reminders of unwelcome reality” (14). Tom Shakespeare, in his paper “Joking A Part,” adds to Hunt’s claim. Shakespeare conjectures that maybe the denial of their vulnerability, incompetence, and frailty is what normates are projecting on the “others”:

If impairment and illness challenge our sense of selves and remind us of our mortality, perhaps this is threatening or difficult to deal with, and necessitates exclusion and ridicule. Extreme physical difference is disturbing to our expectations of order and normality, and convention, and as Mary Douglas reminds us, anomaly demands a response, whether this is violence or veneration, expulsion or sanctification. (Shakespeare 4)

People with disabilities have endured being the targets of jokes that undermine their worth and validate societal biases. Article 8 (“Awareness-raising”) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, aims to “foster respect,” “combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices,” create awareness regarding the “capabilities and contributions of persons with disabilities,” and “promote positive perception” of them (8). To achieve the goals mentioned in this Article, it is persons with disabilities themselves who need to step forward to raise awareness and sensitise the masses. The ability of a “normal” individual to objectively understand and address the issues faced by persons with disabilities may not be as practical as the firsthand experiences and perspectives of those who have personally struggled with disability. It is through accepting their own identity that individuals with disabilities are empowered to articulate their concerns and identify the oppressive structures that restrict their full participation in society.

To challenge prevailing myths and taboos, individuals with disabilities must actively subvert these narratives and create their own space within society. Rosemarie Garland Thomson emphasises the necessity for persons with disabilities to navigate social relationships to be recognised as fully human by “normates” (non-disabled individuals). She writes, “To be

granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humour, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort” (Thomson 13). If persons with disabilities want to engage in society, they must develop interpersonal skills to put their audience at ease. Tom Shakespeare explains that their abnormality is invisible to a person with an impairment, but to a stranger, the difference can be overwhelming (5). According to him, “the disabled person must find a way of acknowledging the difference, showing that it is not important and that the interaction can now progress” (5). The initial stigma of disability needs to be neutralised to initiate comfortable relationships.

Comedy can potentially serve as a tool for integrating persons with disabilities into mainstream society. The underlying irrationality behind random thoughts and misconceptions can be exposed through humour, allowing for an alternative and more subjective understanding of reality. Disability, when presented through comedy, can be portrayed as an intriguing and diverse way of experiencing life, contributing to a multifaceted approach to human existence (Reid et al. 629). As a vehicle for communication, comedy can play a crucial role in subverting, critiquing, challenging, and countering the prevailing misconceptions and stereotypes associated with disability. Disability studies scholars Ewa McGrail and Alicja Reiger, in their research paper “Humour in Literature about Children with Disability: What are We Seeing in this Literature?” state that humour helps relieve stress, bridge differences, and facilitate social and developmental interactions. According to McGrail and Reiger, humor becomes the “coping mechanism, a communication strategy, or a means to perceive and communicate to others the positive aspects of their lives” (2).

Throughout history, the portrayal of persons with disabilities in denigrating caricatures has served a dual purpose: entertaining the “normates” and perpetuating prejudices and stereotypes about disability. In their paper “John Callahan’s Pelswick Cartoon & a New Phase of Disability Humour,” Beth Haller and Sue Ralph outline four phases of disability humour that categorise the nature of humour used about persons with disabilities. These phases offer insight into the evolving nature of disability humour over the decades.

The initial two phases are characterised by Haller and Ralph as “destructive humour,” which involves eliciting laughter from normates at the expense of persons with disabilities. By understanding the evolution of disability humour, it becomes evident how comedy has been used to marginalise and devalue individuals with disabilities throughout different historical contexts. In the first phase, individuals with disabilities were fabricated as “representative fools” and exhibited in institutions or freak shows, presenting their deformed bodies to a “normal” audience. The second phase of disability humour is marked by defamatory jokes created by non-disabled individuals about people with disabilities, serving to belittle them based on their limitations. These patronising jokes have been categorised into various genres, such as Helen Keller jokes, sick jokes, and quadriplegic jokes, all aimed at mocking the perceived inadequacies of persons with disabilities (Haller and Ralph par.7). These historical phases of disability humour highlight the demeaning and derogatory treatment of persons with disabilities through humour, perpetuating negative stereotypes and reinforcing societal prejudices.

People with disabilities control the third and fourth phases of disability humour. These last two phases set the grounds for “constructive humour” that “creates positive environments where people support each other, promotes self-esteem and creates mutually beneficial connections” (Baum 4). In the third

phase, humour serves as a means of entertainment, but it primarily allows non-disabled people to understand the issues related to disability in a comprehensive context. In this phase, individuals with disabilities have to take responsibility and employ satire to create and articulate their experiences. Their descriptions aim to draw attention to the social barriers and discriminatory attitudes perpetuated by normates that hinder their personal development and advancement. Disability humour becomes an arena where persons with disabilities and non-disabled individuals have a role to play. In the latter two phases identified by Haller and Ralph, persons with disabilities take center stage, challenging reductionist narratives imposed upon them. They strive to shed light on their unique concerns and offer subjective perspectives on various matters concerning disability.

In the fourth phase, a shift occurs from a disability-focused approach to an inclusive and integrated approach in the realm of disability humour. This phase dissolves the topic of disability into the diverse humour panorama, making the person with disability an active participant in the humour landscape, while subtly emphasising “normalcy, equality and ‘bold honesty’” (Lockyer 1400). This integrated approach seeks to normalise the inclusion of disability and humour, promoting equal representation and a more authentic and candid portrayal of persons with disabilities in comedic contexts.

The twenty-first century is witnessing the coming-out of the “others” of society and voicing their concerns. Ellen Samuels, in her paper “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out,” explains “coming out” as “a process of redefinition of one’s personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the normate, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity” (319). She further explains that coming out implies that the “disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as

something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down” (319). In this context, humour plays a vital role in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities into the mainstream by drawing the general public’s attention towards previously taboo topics. Tom Shakespeare, supporting the comic stance for expression, writes that persons with disabilities have gradually accepted their impairments and successfully overcome the consequential impediments, proving that it does not undermine their subjectivity or possibility (51). Disability humour, thus, marks “the boundaries between cultural groups and communities and as the social glue that holds them together” (Albrecht 67).

At its core, humour can alleviate tension and anxiety, allowing for smoother interactions where individuals do not feel obligated to empathise overly or become overly self-conscious in their approach. Granting normates the freedom to talk and laugh about their disability establishes a rapport and eases communication to overcome the entrenched stigma around this topic. However, it is essential to highlight that invoking laughter about disability requires the direct involvement of persons with disabilities in creating comedic content. Without the endorsement and participation of persons with disabilities, such jokes can be perceived as insulting and patronising (Haller and Ralph par. 9). The active engagement of individual with disabilities ensures that the comedic material remains authentic, respectful, and sensitive to their experiences and perspectives.

Literature is crucial in initiating and disseminating knowledge about the subjective understanding of disability while educating normates on effectively addressing this topic. Children born with impairments may develop resilience against verbal abuse, but those who acquire disabilities later in life often face disapproval from their peers, leading to depression and insecurity. In the twenty-first century, authors have adeptly

portrayed the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their subsequent journey of overcoming obstacles to find their place in society. These literary works not only shed light on the hardships endured by characters with disabilities but also feature confident and empowered protagonists who subtly critique the ignorance of the normates.

Accepting one's disability is the beginning of the struggles faced by individuals with disabilities. They must also navigate an environment that disables them and contend with the conventional outlook of society. Literature vividly describes the tribulations experienced by protagonists with disabilities, with some works showcasing protagonists who confidently challenge societal norms and mock the ignorance of normates. However, accepting their disability does not mark the end of the journey for individuals with disabilities. They must actively strive to create awareness and carve out a space for themselves within society.

To achieve mainstream inclusion, individuals with disabilities must engage and interact with their "normal" peers, conveying that they do not seek pity or sympathy but desire equal treatment. Humour is a powerful tool for persons with disabilities to captivate their audience, critique stereotypes surrounding disability, express their frustrations comically, and educate others about the topic's fallacies and misconceptions. By employing humour, individuals with disabilities can grab their audience's attention, challenge societal stereotypes, and foster a greater understanding of disability.

In Josh Sundquist's novel *Love and First Sight* (2017), the protagonist Will Porter, a character with visual impairment, offers a realistic portrayal of the experiences of a visually impaired individual attending a mainstream school. Having spent the first sixteen years of his life in an institution for children with visual impairments, Will is determined to break

out of his “blind bubble” and pursue his dream of becoming a journalist (Sundquist 10).

The narrative of *Love and First Sight* captivates readers through Will’s commentary, which satirises the ignorant perceptions of “normal” individuals around him. The novel begins with Will being escorted to his class by the school’s Vice Principal, Mr. Johnston. Will is resolute in his desire to blend in with his “normal” classmates and not allow his disability to define his identity. However, his oblivious Vice Principal inadvertently embarrasses him by drawing attention to his disability from the outset. As Mr. Johnston guides Will, he loudly announces, “Clear a path, people! Blind student coming through! Blind student coming through!” (Sundquist 12). The Vice Principal’s declaration blatantly highlights Will’s blindness as a defining characteristic. In response, Will sarcastically confides in the readers, “Wow, thanks, Mr. Johnston. I’m sure this is gaining me so many popularity points at my new school. My election as Prom King is now all but assured” (Sundquist 12). Mr. Johnston’s insensitivity persists as he introduces Will to his classmates. Despite the offensiveness of the situation, the author’s use of side commentary allows Will to mock his teacher’s ignorance, turning the scenario comical. The episode unfolds as follows:

“This is Will, a student who has transferred to our school this year. He’s blind.” Perhaps because this is English class, he adds a helpful definition of the word: “He can’t see anything... nothing at all.” He pauses to allow the gravity of my tragic situation to sink in. “Life is very difficult for him. Please offer him your assistance whenever you can, because—” (Sundquist 12)

Unable to listen to this gibberish any longer and feeling that the Vice-Principal's speech was making everyone uncomfortable, Will intervenes and steps forth to introduce himself. Will tackles his uncomfortable situation by humoring his readers with his teasing commentary on the insensible approach of his teacher while taking charge of the narrative.

Will has been portrayed as a determined and ambitious young man who yearns to venture into the mainstream and lead a normal routine life. On the other hand, Mr. Johnston represents the archetypal uninformed "normal" individual who lacks understanding about how to approach individuals like Will and their impairments. Despite such callous reactions from the mainstream population, Will remains undeterred and becomes even more determined to participate in society actively.

Literature concerning persons with disabilities is increasingly incorporating comedic elements to highlight the uninformed behavior displayed by normates. Humour can be valuable in facilitating interactions between the person with disability and their non-disabled peers. Will Porter acknowledges the power of jokes in subtly and sharply conveying, "It's amazing how jokes can teach you the things people think but are too polite to say aloud, prejudices I assume other kids absorb with the help of their eyes—racism, sexism, and the like" (Sundquist 26). During initial interactions, non-disabled individuals may hesitate to approach persons with disabilities, fearing that they may inadvertently appear overly inquisitive or insensitive. Therefore, people with disabilities will have to initiate discussions to alleviate tension and create an environment conducive to meaningful conversations. For encouraging interactions, Albrecht mentions that humour performs the mediating role that "allows us to understand better the lives and trajectories of disabled people; to understand what it is like to span two worlds and cultures. Disjunctions between these two worlds are the basis of humour" (72). Thereby,

individuals with disabilities possess the agency to negotiate, renegotiate, and co-construct societal expectations and beliefs regarding disability. As such, they play a crucial role in initiating dialogue and bringing the larger society into the conversation.

In the twenty-first century, a new form of discourse known as “stand-up comedy” is emerging as a powerful tool for facilitating the mainstream inclusion of marginalised individuals. This trend is gaining popularity due to its adaptability, ease of organisation, and ability to convey messages in a fair and accessible manner. Stand-up comedians who perform solo acts have the freedom to communicate openly, drawing from their subjective experiences to elaborate on various topics. The immediate response from the audience further enhances the effectiveness of this platform. Performers can gauge the audience’s reaction in real-time to determine whether they enjoy the performance while also understanding the context and expectations. The comedic nature of this platform grants presenters an “interactional power,”ⁱⁱ allowing them to exert control over their audience while asserting their self-identity and challenging their status as oppressed voices in society (Lockyer 1402).

Stand-up comedy provides performers with disabilities a platform to share their experiences, offering a refreshing departure from their stereotypical portrayal as weak and dependent individuals. According to Sharon Lockyer, stand-up comedy has three key performative features. The first feature is the “authentic” expression of disability by individuals with disabilities. Through their performances, comedians with impairments “present an insider, although not essentialized, perspective, blurring the boundaries of the historical Us-Them dichotomy” (Reid et al. 630). Descriptions from people with disabilities make it apparent that impairment is a regular aspect of their existence, and it is “not unspeakable or unacceptable, but quotidian and banal” (Shakespeare 7). According to Teresa

Milbrodt, being the subject of a joke also represents the agency that persons with disabilities have for making fun of their regular mishaps (par. 3). Reid et al. elaborate, “By shifting from victim to perpetrator, they [persons with disabilities] undermine the power of people who laugh at them. They emerge as capable people who find life’s predicaments amusing” (635).

Lockyer identifies “reversal disability discourse” as the second key feature of performing stand-up comedy. Reverse humour is a discourse whose roots can be traced to that of an earlier discourse that “uses identical signs but which employs these signs for a reverse semantic effect” (Weaver 32). The semantic reversal can be created by changing the social dynamics of the joke teller. This discourse uses the “comic rhetorical strategy” to expose the flawed assumptions and ignorant comments that non-disabled people make while interacting with individuals with disabilities. By employing this methodology, comedians draw attention to the disabling social structures and challenge the conventional perspectives of non-disabled individuals. Through comedic rebuttals, they effectively counter the antagonistic perceptions of the “normal” public, utilising the paradoxical nature of humour to create an impact. Disability humour, according to Albrecht, “raises a hidden paradox” that can be uncanny for the normates as they cannot grasp “what is so funny about having a disability when others think that it is a tragedy” (67). Tom Shakespeare adds to this context:

. . . jokes between disabled people about the limitations and unpredictabilities of impairment achieve much of their comic power because they are so shocking to non-disabled people, who can imagine nothing less funny than extreme physical differences. Reversal of expectation is always richly comedic, and there is no greater reversal than treating what is

commonly represented as a tragedy as if it is a farce. (7)

The third interconnected performative feature of stand-up comedy is the concept of “shared laughter” (Lockyer 1407). For a comedian, establishing a connection with the audience is paramount. The comedian creates an environment where everyone can relate to the shared experiences, find humour in the jokes, and grasp the underlying messages. These performances foster a sense of “laughing with” rather than “laughing at” individuals with disabilities. The performer is tasked with building a community where everyone is pragmatically educated about the experiences of people with disabilities. While laughing conveys that the artist with a disability brings different experiences and perceptions about the world, and that this is not a factor that should impede communication (Milbrodt par. 20).

Through comedy, people with disabilities can find validation, support, and a sense of belonging. They can connect with others who share their struggles, triumphs, and humour. This shared experience fosters a bond and a sense of camaraderie among community members. Moreover, comedy clubs and events promoting inclusivity and accessibility send a powerful message of acceptance and equality. By providing accessible venues, such as wheelchair ramps or sign language interpreters, they demonstrate their commitment to creating an inclusive space for all individuals, regardless of their abilities. This sense of community-building is crucial, as it helps combat social isolation and creates a supportive network for individuals who may often feel marginalised or misunderstood in mainstream society.

Members of the society have to be sensitised about the experiences and perspectives of persons with disabilities to create an inclusive educational and work environment. As

McGrail and Reiger state, “Reading about characters with disabilities, who like their able-bodied peers can appreciate and produce humour, can help children and adolescents to see individuals with disabilities as complete people” (16). Disability Humour is a contemporary art form that is emancipatory in nature and encourages the coming out of persons with disabilities, to make society accept differences. Thus humour “is not a sign of repressed ideas or feelings, but on the contrary, it reflects a full awareness of the circumstances one is facing on regular basis” (Moran par. 9). Usage of humour makes normates comfortable about interacting with persons with disabilities, and it also motivates them to accept themselves and become confident about their identity. Gary L. Albrecht mentions, “disability humour may convey group solidarity, articulate inherent value structures, put experiences in context and ease the difficulties experienced in everyday life” (67). Comedy, thereby, becomes a medium to rationally counter the reductionist narratives, change the pessimistic attitude of society, and string together the different communities of society.

Endnotes

- i. “Normates”: Rosemarie Garland Thomson introduces the term “normate” in her work *Extraordinary Bodies*. She defines “normate” as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8).
- ii. Interactional Power: Interactional power is “created when a participant is perceived by others to be more dominant, hold higher status, or be an expert or an authority” (Simmons-Mackie and Damico 87).

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