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Disability in the Writing of Irvine Welsh: A Discussion Paper

Introduction

In this paper I shall explore the notion of disability within the writings of Irvine Welsh. As might be expected I am using the concept of disability from a purely social model perspective in the sense that it refers to the social oppression of people with perceived impairments. I am focusing on the work of Irvine Welsh because I believe he is probably one of the most important and, indeed, popular writers of the 1990s.

I also believe that one of the most effective ways of gaining an insight into any social phenomenon which, in this case, is the social interactions between people with and without perceived impairments, is through the detailed analysis of the communication media, and popular culture in particular. This is equally applicable to representations of both non-fiction and fiction although here, of course, I'm focusing on the latter .

Whilst I'm not a great reader I think literature can be especially useful in this regard. By its very nature cinema and television tends toward the sensational and the stereotype. Novelists and fiction writers, on the other hand, are impelled to produce complex and intriguing storylines with fully rounded and plausible characters in order to hold the reader's attention. Moreover, stories which are located in the contemporary world must inevitably contain an element of truth with which the reader can identify; in short, they must be believable.

Irvine Welsh is one such writer and widely regarded as one of the most important and gifted British newcomers of the 1990s. Once described as 'the poet laureate of the chemical generation' he is the author of the cult novel 'Trainspotting' (1993); now a hugely successful and award winning film. From this spectacular beginning in 1993 he has produced two collections of short stories 'Acid House'(1995) and 'Ecstasy' (1996) and a novel 'Maribou Stork Nightmare' (1996) .

Using a range of approaches from intense realism to cynical humour with an occasional lapse into the surreal, Welsh writes about the world of the outsider, the deviant, the criminal, the drug user, and the football hooligan. His characters are derived from a post Thatcherite underclass whose world is characterised by a mixture of financial insecurity, violence, and cynical hedonism. It is a world in which perceived impairments are an everyday fact of life. Indeed, many of Welsh's key players would be described as disabled people; albeit not in a political sense.

In this presentation I will examine some of the principle characters in Welsh's work; notably, in 'Trainspotting' (the novel not the film, interestingly the disabled character discussed below was excluded from the film version), 'The House of John Deaf' and 'A Smart C (from Acid House) 'Lorraine Goes to Livingstone', 'Fortune's Always Hiding' (both in Ecstasy) and the 'Maribou Stork Nightmare'. Through a broadly based content evaluations of the principal disabled characters in these stories I hope to provide fresh insights on the role of cultural analysis within the context of disability studies, the relationship between structure and culture, and the nature of prejudice.

Trainspotting.

Because of its success most people are familiar with 'Trainspotting' . It is the story of the lives of a small group of Edinburgh drug users which among other things documents in graphic detail the highs and lows of chemical abuse. As might be expected the film provides only a limited interpretation of Welsh's book and as a consequence much of the more intriguing and indeed poignant aspects of the storyline are lost. This is particularly the case from a disability studies perspective. In the book, for example, there are several references to the implications of contracting HIV as a result of drug misuse.

But only a fraction of this finds its way on to the large screen with Tommy - a blond haired blur eyed heterosexual male 'who didnae tell lies, didnae use drugs and kept eself fit'. Cast in the role of beautiful loser in the film, Tommy, is introduced to heroin by Mark Renton - one of the principal characters in both the film and the book - following the loss of his long time girlfriend Liz. Thereafter Tommy becomes addicted to the drug and after sharing needles with other users in one of Edinburgh's notorious 'shooting galleries' , a scene not shown in the film, contracts HIV and dies.

In contrast, the implications of HIV are a major feature of Welsh's narrative. See for instance Renton 's commentary on the squalid conditions in which Tommy is living following the onset of HIV, and their implications for Tommy's ability to survive with the condition when compared to those with the same disease but who have considerably more resources (pp. 314-321).

Moreover, one of the main characters in the book - Johnny Swann, nicknamed the Mother Superior because of the length of his (heroin) habit - has to have his leg removed because he:

'ran out of veins and started shooting intae his arteries. It only took a few ay they shots tae gie urn gangerine. Then the leg had tae go'(p. 311).

Following the leg's removal Johnny maintains his previous lifestyle - drug user and dealer - but supplements his income by exploiting his impairment and begging as a disabled ex-serviceman. With a large placard bearing the words 'FALKLANDS VETERAN -I LOST MY LEG FOR MY COUNTRY, PLEASE HELP' Renton watches him make almost £27.00 in 'a couple of hours' (p. 329).

Acid House.

There are few references to HIV in any of Welsh 's later work but the incidence of impairment figures strongly. In 'Acid House' a book of short stories there are two tales in which disabled people are featured. 'The House of John Deaf' documents an incident in a flat on a council estate or 'scheme' occupied by an old deaf man and his deaf grandson - John Deaf. Their house is a refuge for truants who live on the scheme as the old man doesn't send John to school. The story is about a fight between John Deaf and one of the truants over the former's sexual relationship with the latter's sister.

John's grandfather has a stroke and dies during the fight. The tale concludes with the news that John is 'taken away'. The story's narrator is John's adversary and he is glad that his opponent has gone but not because John Deaf is actually deaf but because:

A 've nivir been the same since that doin eh gied ays' (p. 102).

, A Smart C. ..' , also in Acid House, is a longer story or 'Novella' about a period in the life of a young man called Bri and his fiends. The plot revolves mainly around Bri's attempts to hold down a job, control his heroin use, and his involvement in the murder of a blind man, Craig Gifford, referred to throughout the story as Blind C ...

Bri and his friends dislike Blind C... intensely not because of his blindness, but because of his irritating habit of interrupting people in mid conversation and correcting them over some minor detail. This tendency for 'pedantic asides' was made worse by the fact that Blind C... enjoyed the protection of a particularly hard individual known as Big Aly Moncrief.

But following an especially exasperating evening in the pub with the blind man and Moncrief, Bri and his friend Roxy stumble across the former on his way home. Seeing that he is alone they attack him from behind and steal his wallet. The initial motivation for the assault, however, is not financial but sheer anger and frustration. For as Bri put it the pair's antipathy toward their victim:

'had simmered away for as long as I could recall. But it fairly blazed once we broke that shared taboo of its acknowledgement. The taboo had been a fairly powerful one. After all you are supposed to empathise with and perhaps give greater social licence to someone with such a terrible disability. However, being blind does not make you a good person and you can be just as much of a c. ..as any sighted person. Sometimes even more of a c... Like Blind C... (p. 211).

Ecstasy.

Disabled characters also appear in Welsh's 1996 collection 'Ecstasy'. Indeed, they play a central role in two of the book's three stories. They are 'Lorraine Goes to Livingstone' and 'Fortune's Always Hiding' .

The first of these two tales is about Rebecca, a successful but seriously overweight middle aged writer specialising in romantic fiction, and her parasitic and perverted husband, Perky. Perky does not work and indulges in perverse

sexual practices paid for by his wife's royalties. The story revolves around Rebecca's discovery of Perky's pastimes during a period of lengthy convalescence following a stroke. Rebecca finds out about her husband's proclivities from her nurse and subsequent friend Lorraine.

Rebecca reaps her revenge by writing a particularly pornographic tale which is in marked contrast to her previous work and which inadvertently triggers Perky's demise. After reading Rebecca's manuscript he gets drunk and is killed in a road accident. Following Perky's death Rebecca regains her hitherto lost self esteem and starts enjoying life by socialising with Lorraine. The point here of course is that the period of impairment which followed Rebecca's stroke had a decidedly positive outcome.

'Fortune's Always Hiding', subtitled 'A corporate drug romance', recants the tale of a love affair between a football hooligan named Dave and a woman with no arms called Samantha. Dave is a semi-skilled motor mechanic who works when he feels like it and adds to his income by robbing wealthy houses while the residents are at home by threatening them with violence with the help of his two mates Bal and Shorthand. A West Ham supporter - hence the title of the story - he gets his kicks from Ecstasy and violence.

Samantha has no arms because her mother used the drug 'Tenzadrine' during her pregnancy. She is obsessed with revenge on the corporate executives who marketed the drug without first ensuring that it had been properly tested. Before meeting Dave, she and her German ex-lover, Andreas, also a Tenzadrine survivor, had systematically murdered several of these executives without getting caught. Growing up in the punk era of the 1970s both had learned to cover their fears with sneers; Samantha was drawn to Andreas after she saw him face down a group of skinheads who verbally abused him because of his visible impairment. Like Samantha Andreas has no arms.

However, Dave, who has a non-disabled 'pretty tasty' wife who he sees regularly but doesn't live with her, falls madly in love with Samantha. For Dave, Samantha is not simply pretty but 'beautiful' and comparable to a:

'f....g white dove crammed full of more MDMA (Ecstasy) than I've ever had in my f....g life' (p. 103).

After a fairly short romance and intense sexual relationship, Samantha persuades Dave to help her kidnap the chief executive of the company that developed Tenzadrine, Bruce Stourgess. Together they succeed and the story concludes with Samantha hacking off Stourgess 's arms with an electric saw in Dave's garage. This is because Samantha wants those responsible for her abnormality to experience a similar fate.

Whilst this tale embodies much of the 'disabled person as evil, stereotype it may also be seen as a classic David and Goliath story of struggle by the powerless against the powerful. In this case, the victims of corporate mismanagement and exploitation against the perpetrators of such situations: the chief executives of transnational multi million dollar corporations, portrayed here as both immoral and corrupt. Stourgess 's downfall, for example, is only possible because of his insatiable liking for working class rent boys. Dave, playing the part of one such boy, picks him up in a well known London contact club and lures him back to his garage where Samantha is waiting with her saw.

Maribou Stork Nightmare.

The main character, Roy Strang, in Welsh's second full length novel 'Maribou Stork Nightmare' has a slight limp after being savaged by his father's dog, Winston, when he was two years old. He also comes from what can only be described as a 'disabled' family. For example, in Chapter Two Strang says:

'I grew up in what was not so much a family as a genetic disaster. While people always seem under the impression that their household is normal, I from a very early age, almost as soon as I was aware, was embarrassed and ashamed by my family' (p. 20).

He describes his petty criminal and violence loving father, John Strang, as a 'basket case' and reminds the reader that his mother , Vet, began to have 'mental breakdowns' before she married John. Further:

'She would have these breakdowns intermittently until it got to the stage... where it's hard to tell when she's not having one' (p. 21).

Roy has three brothers and a sister. One of his brothers Elgin, is severely disabled and was put in the 'Gorgie Venture Hostel for Exceptional Young Men' where 'he'd be properly looked after by specialist staff' (p. 48) when the family emigrate to South Africa. Later in the story another brother, Bernard, who is gay, contracts HIV.

It is this background which propels Roy into a life of delinquency and brutal violence. After being recruited to the local 'cashies' (a term used to refer to gangs of football supporters renowned for their casual appearance and a taste for unprovoked violence) he is elevated to 'top boy' status and participates in the kidnap and gang rape of an innocent young woman, Kirsty Chalmers.

Engulfed with an overwhelming sense of guilt following this sickening episode, Roy escapes to Manchester. But unable to throw off his unrelenting feelings of shame he eventually returns home to Edinburgh where he tries to commit suicide with the help of a plastic bag and an overdose of Paracetamol. But the attempt fails and he is rushed to hospital in a coma. Indeed, the entire sorry tale is told from the perspective of Roy's recollections and fantasies during a protracted period of unconsciousness while in his hospital bed. Moreover, at the point of regaining consciousness, Kirsty, the rape victim, pays him a visit and reaps a terrible but fitting revenge.

Discussion.

Clearly then perceived impairments are an important feature of Welsh's world. It's important to note too that his portrayals of people with accredited impairments are not simply one-dimensional. Nor do they appear to experience excessive or overt prejudice from non-disabled peers. They are a part of rather than apart from the communities in which they live.

This may be attributable to a variety of factors. First, Welsh is writing about an environment and culture of which he has first hand experience. While writing 'Trainspotting' he 'worked, rested and raved' in the working class areas of Edinburgh. There is an undeniable link between chronic illness, impairment and class. In this type of environment structural oppression and the ensuing multiple deprivations which flow from it are often a common and shared experience. Hence, living with the consequences of impairment is an everyday fact of life and not something which is divorced from reality.

Further, Welsh's principal characters are drawn from an outsider culture or subculture which is composed of both locational and actual outsiders. The former are those who choose to locate themselves outside the mainstream of community life and the latter are those who have, or believe they have, little choice in the matter. Here, through preference or necessity, conventional morality and values are rejected and replaced by appropriate alternatives: in this case, a value system where physical and intellectual differences are less of a problem.

Finally, it is clear from the above that the analysis of culture, and popular culture in particular, has much to offer in terms of explaining the complexities of social responses to perceived impairment, and that such analyses can only be properly understood when linked to structural forces.

All too often cultural studies of oppression are separated from the structural and material forces which create oppression. Such approaches tend to obscure the material base upon which oppression rests. For me, this is the very opposite of what is needed.

References.

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(Note: This is the first draft of a paper to be developed in the coming year. It should not, therefore, be reproduced in its present form.

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