



## The History of Disability Portrayal in the Media

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by Erin

*Erin has done her research in this first part of an ongoing series on Disability Culture. Check out installment one here and then [TALK BACK](#) in the [FORUM!](#)*

Tiny Tim. Helen Keller. Captain Hook. These three very different personalities have one thing in common: a disability. Tiny Tim brought tears to the eyes of young and old as he faced the adversity of hobbling around on crutches at such a tender age while enthusiastically exclaiming "God Bless us everyone!". The story of Helen Keller inspired many as we watched her face deafness, blindness, and underestimation on her way to brilliance. And Captain Hook? We scorned that bitter, scheming captain with a hook for a hand as he attempted to bring demise to the ever-magical boy in green tights. If you let these three legendary characters swirl in your brain for a minute, you just might be able to relive the heartbreaking innocence and irony of Tiny Tim's blessing, the feeling of general good as Helen Keller finally achieved the fame she so richly deserved, and the deep hatred for the despicable, evil Captain Hook. What you likely won't realize is the typical stereotypes that these characters fulfill and have been fulfilling in the media for decades on end, disabled innocence (Tiny Tim), disabled inspiration (Helen Keller), and disabled evil (Captain Hook). Think about it. When was the last time you tripped through the crowded school halls, only to pass a child on crutches blessing random students? Chances are he worked his way through with an occasional smile, facing a well-meant "hang in there" and a few awkward, demeaning looks. And while all people in general have a bit of extraordinary in them, it's very rare that a person with a disability achieves something great enough to win the attention of the media, no matter how misguided the media's standards might be. While times have changed, the portrayal of people with disabilities in media hasn't improved much from the mocking fifty second "The Fake Beggar" (an 1898 film by Thomas Edison considered to be the first film addressing disabilities in which a man pretends to be blind in order to collect some extra money and is eventually chased by the police) (Ivory, 1). In this first installment of **Disability Culture**, we will discuss the history of the portrayal of people with disabilities in literature and the movies. You'll soon agree that although some people with disabilities may fit these age old stereotypes, those who do certainly aren't in the majority. Why further poison the already dangerously bias view of minorities by the public?

Literature in general hasn't always been kind to people with disabilities, especially the classics, 19th, and early 20th century written work. Classics such as Sophocles's Oedipus Rex, Shakespeare's Richard III, and Herman Melville's Moby Dick all depict characters with disabilities with an inherent evil (Krentz, 1). Down in the Boondocks, a 1970's children book by Wilson Gage, refers to a spooky farmer who is "deaf in one ear" and uses an "ear trumpet who tells him to hear" (Lewis, 3). The story ends with a robber declaring that he will never again visit the Boondocks because of the deaf farmer, who is portrayed "humorously" as subhuman and dumb.

The "Cinema of Isolation" has been just as harsh, if not harsher for more than a century (Klepper, 1). As stated above, people with disabilities debuted in the movies with the crude "humor" of Thomas Edison's fifty second "The Fake Beggar". People with disabilities continued to be used for "frivolous shocks and gags" early on as in 1908's "Don't Pull My Leg", starring a stolen prosthetic leg as the main source of entertainment. Some films, such as 1931's "City Lights", refuse to deal with the (in many cases) finality of a disability. This classic Charlie Chaplin movie starred a young girl who was cured of her blindness during the duration of the film, "allowing" the story to end happily ever



after. In the past and unfortunately still today, few movies seem to contain the element of disability at the end. The movie usually concludes with the character with disabilities being cured or dying, leading the viewer to the assumption that life with a disability can in no way be rewarding or fulfilling. Many saw a light at the end of the tunnel with 1946's "The Best Years of Our Lives", starring WWII vet Harold Russell, who lived with a disability in real life. Numerous members of the disability community applauded the opportunity for a person with a disability to actually portray himself in a movie.

The Vietnam War era movie, "Coming Home", took a more head on approach in representing the true life and character of an individual with a disability. The movie portrayed the glaring disability as a societal acceptance problem rather than a personal one and covered the drama of adjustment as well as the overcoming of the normal period of bitterness and grief after the onset of a disability.

An end to the unfair portrayal and unrealistic depiction of people with disabilities has yet to see an end, however. Films even as late as 1989, such as "See No Evil, Hear No Evil" featured Robert Pryor and Gene Wilder milking puns and laughs from visual and hearing impairments. Enduring cinema characters such as Peter Pan's Captain Hook and Star War's Darth Vader (who requires a mechanical breathing device to live) continue to portray their characters with malicious bitterness in thousands of VCRs everyday. This only compounds the damage that has been done, is being done, and will be done to the character of disabled people worldwide.

So what's a concerned citizen to do? Have conditions improved recently, and if so, how? It seems that prejudices against disabled is the last that's been allowed to exist. Is it here to stay? We'll address this issue in the next installment, **Disability Portrayal and the Media Today**.

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