

Disability in Comics

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[Page from *Hawkeye* #19 art by David Aja]. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from: <https://thespectatorial.wordpress.com/2014/10/28/tth-stuff-what-dont-get-spoke-hawkeye-and-disability-done-well/>

Realistic lived disability in comics is an unfortunate rarity. There is a steady habit of only giving characters a disability for aesthetics, tragedy, or pathos for the character rather than having it be a relatable part of their lives for a reader with a disability. The issue of negating their disability with their superpower and abilities is also a common trope, followed by a final, very troubling, trend in comic media that has come with the increase of comic book adaptation films. This trend being the erasure of disabilities in the adaptation of a comic to film.

Disability as Set Dressing

When a character with disability is given a role in comic books and graphic novels, their disability is often used, not as a part of their character in any real or relatable fashion, but rather as an aesthetic choice or thematic element. Their disability serves as a reinforcement of the ‘tragedy’ of their character, or as some form of pathos or karmic punishment for their perceived misdeeds (Diamond & Poharec, 2017). This reduces the aspect of disability from a trait of the character and a part of their life, to set dressing that serves no purpose other than as an ‘inspirational’ aspect for the, presumed by the creators, non-disabled reader. Therefore, the readers, instead of having to actually empathize or relate with aspects of an experience of a disabled person, have the narrative of disabled bodies being aberrant from the ‘norm’ of non-disabled bodies reinforced (Diamond & Poharec, 2017; Squier, 2008).

Disability as Punishment

The character of Dr. Stephen Strange is a good example of the common usage of disability used as karmic punishment towards characters. Dr. Strange is an arrogant and calculating surgeon who, through a catastrophic accident, has severe damage done to his hands. His hands are permanently injured to the point where he can no longer perform surgery (Marvel, 2019). This event sets him on his journey to try to cure himself of his condition, first through medicine, then through magic. His path on this journey leads gaining magical abilities (Marvel, 2019). This journey however is not about him coming to terms with his disability or learning to live his life with it, it is about this event forcing him to become a better person. The film even adds to the disability as pathos by forcing Doctor Strange to choose between his abilities and healing his hands. This is not even presented as an act of acceptance and agency on his part, it is framed as a sacrifice to allow him to protect the world (Alonso & Derrickson, 2016). Once again,

punishment and pathos. His disability is not used as part of his character, it is a form of punishment for his misdeeds, and then a reason for his character to be perceived as a martyr for his sacrifice to protect the world. This is something that some ascribe to Marvel Comics patterns of character development popularly credited to the late Stan Lee. Stan Lee regularly conceptualized characters with origin stories centered on traumatic experiences that force them to become stronger than they were before (Toscano, 2018). This method is something that robs characters of an actual lived experience of disability since it immediately prompts them towards ‘overcoming’ that disability.

Disability Erasure

Disability Negation

Disability Erasure is something that affects many characters with disabilities, with a prominent example being Daredevil. Daredevil is a character that is blinded by radioactive waste that burns his eyes after he saves someone from getting hit by a truck (Toscano, 2018). Though this accident does cause blindness, this trait is immediately negated by his development of a radar sense that doubles as sight (Toscano, 2018). This allows the character to retain the aesthetics of blindness without any of the experiences of being so, to the point that in both the 2003 Daredevil film adaptation and the recently released Daredevil Netflix series even go out of their way to point out that Matt Murdock, the eponymous Daredevil, only seeks out traditionally attractive women, and is able to perceive that they are so (Arad & Johnson, 2003; Chory & Goddard, 2015). This portrayal shows an unwillingness to deal with both the realities of blindness and an aversion to a perceived ‘imperfect’ body (Diamond & Poharec, 2017). This is something that is further solidified with the series’ unwillingness to allow Matt Murdock to pursue women that are not perceived by seeing people as attractive. Their treatment of women

that are considered by the creators as flawed is another case of viewing the non-traditionally beautiful and 'complete' body as monstrous or grotesque (Diamond & Poharec, 2017).

Disability Lost in Adaptation

This is something that has become more prevalent with the increase of comic adaptation films in the last decade, but one particularly egregious example is the removal of deafness from the character Clint Barton (Hawkeye) in his film incarnation. It was noted by activists and comic readers that Hawkeye's disability had been removed from his characterization and he was being played by a hearing actor in his film incarnation for the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) (Schatz & George, 2018; Gemmill, 2018). This is an occurrence that people have noted is in line with the MCU's general lack of diversity in all areas including: race, gender, sexuality, and disability (Gemmill, 2018). In this particular case, changing Hawkeye into a non-deaf character is something that changes and erases nearly forty years of comic book history. Comic book incarnations of Hawkeye have been presented with hearing aids and speaking about having a hearing disability since incarnations in the 1980s, and newer comics that discussed his disability had garnered praise (Carmody, 2014; Sava, 2014; Schatz & George, 2018).

Disability with Impact and Meaning

Hawkeye Living with Disability in Comics

The erasure of Hawkeye's deafness in the MCU films is particularly concerning as it is also one of the most recently lauded examples of disability representation in comics. The representation of Hawkeye as a deaf character has not always been the most positive. When this element of his character was first introduced in the 1980s it was through his visible wearing of hearing aids and his struggle with doing so (Schatz & George, 2018). At points in this narrative he also forewent wearing them out of fear that enemies would discover his deafness and use it

against him and his team. This is demonstrative of prevailing attitudes towards deafness at the time, the view of it simply as a medical condition or a weakness, something that needed to be hidden or fixed (Schatz & George, 2018). However, this was a start, and from that basis other writers have been able to make greater strides in representation. In a more recent Hawkeye story, *Hawkeye #19* by Matt Fraction, David Aja, and Matt Hollingsworth, Hawkeye must grapple with becoming completely deaf (Sava, 2014). This issue is fascinatingly told through the use of mostly empty speech bubbles, the inclusion of illustrations of American Sign Language (ASL), and off-kilter text to portray Hawkeye's childhood hearing disability, which also serves as the reason that both he and his brother understand and use ASL (Carmody, 2014; Sava, 2014). Hawkeye's brother, Barney, is also an interesting example of disability representation in this narrative. He is partially paralyzed and uses a wheelchair for mobility. From his inclusion in the narrative the reader gets to see, and perhaps relate to, the difficulties in getting a wheelchair into a taxi in New York, and then up steep stairs (Sava, 2014; Jacobs & Dolmage, 2018). The representation of these characters carries with it some of the realities and difficulties of existing in the world with a disability that the is not well accommodative. It also welcomes non-hearing people into the narrative with untranslated ASL that a non-ASL fluent reader will have to intuit from the art and characters' reactions (Jacobs & Dolmage, 2018). The story is also uplifting, Hawkeye must come to grips with his disability as a part of his reality, but the conclusion of the story shows him accepting help, accepting himself as a part of the world and the community around him, with long panel shots of a crowd containing people of diverse ages, ethnicities, and genders, all triumphantly holding up their hands in the ASL sign for We (Sava, 2014). This positive image shows the connection of people with disabilities as belonging to the diversity of the world around them, making for wonderful representation.

Conclusion

The portrayal of people with disabilities in comics is riddled with problematic tropes that take away from the potential relatability and meaning of these characters. It is irresponsible to be portraying disability as punishment or character aesthetic. Disability negation is an equally problematic trend as it continues to treat people with disabilities as if they need to be fixed to exist in that world. This reinforces societal notions of the aberrant and abnormal body, once again setting back any relatability that could be gained from these characters. Erasure in adaptation is becoming more of a problem with extensive adaptations of comic properties, and further demonstrates the MCU films' serious problems with lack of diversity. It is also a troubling situation when one of the more interesting and complex representations of a deaf character, Hawkeye, is presented as hearing in his film incarnation. Once again this is treating people with disabilities as if they are not respected enough to appear in a film.

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