

English 597  
Critical Issues: Disability in Film and Literature  
Prof. Stephen A. Kuusisto

**Overview:**

Disability has historically functioned in literature and film as a difficult metaphor as disabled characters often reinforce cultural codes of “normalcy” while they also challenge the semiotics of the “heroic” body. This course explores the contradictions in the representations of disability in literature and film by examining the discourse and semiotics of disability. Specifically we will analyze representations of disability in literature and film by seeking to understand the disabled body in its political, social, and cultural contexts. Additionally we will explore tropes and images of disability in literature and film that call on readers and viewers to resist traditional judgments and assumptions about people with disabilities.

**Readings:**

(Course Packet)

Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard Davis

Selections from Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology; Rhetoric of the Image*

Article: “Are TV and Film Like a Language Which We Read” Matthew Williams

Article: “Bodily Semiotics and the Extensions of Man” Goran Sonesson

Selections from *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*  
Martin Norden

Selections from *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis

Selections from *Aids as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag

Selections from *Staring Back: An Anthology*

Selections from *Prozac Diary*, Lauren Slater; Selections from *Darkness Visible*; William Styron

Selections from D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*; Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent*; Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; Kenny Fries, *Body Remember*; Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen*; Nancy Mairs, *Waist High in the World*;

Selected articles from “The Ragged Edge: A Contemporary Journal of Disability and Politics”

**Films:**

“At First Sight” (Mira Sorvino, Val Kilmer)

“Children of a Lesser God” (John Hurt, Marlee Matlin)

“The Deer Hunter” (Rober DeNiro, Meryl Streep, Christopher Walken)

“Depression: Fighting the Dragon”

“Freaks” (1932)

“The Elephant Man” (Anthony Hopkins, John Hurt)

“The Heart is a Lonely Hunter” (Alan Arkin)

“My Left Foot” (Daniel Day-Lewis)

“Passion Fish” (Kelly McDonnell)

### **Films, continued**

“Philadelphia”

“Vital signs: Crip Culture Talks Back”

“When Billy Broke His Head”

### **Course Plan**

Week One:

“The Body Politic” –Disability vs. the Healthy State

Readings: Walt Whitman; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*; Article:

“Bodily Semiotics and the Extensions of Man” Article: “Are TV and Film Like a Language Which We Read?”

Film: *Freaks*

Week Two:

“The Medical Model of Disability”

Readings: Robert Murphy; Kenny Fries; Nancy Mairs; Georgina Kleege; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*

Film: *The Elephant Man*

Week Three

“Social Formations of Disability”

Readings: Selections from *The Cinema of Isolation*; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*; Selections from *Staring Back*; Selections from Roland Barthes, *The Rhetoric of the Image*

Film:

*My Left Foot*

Week Four:

“Disability and Sexuality:

Readings: Selections from Nancy Mairs; D.H. Lawrence; Selections from *Staring Back*; Selections from Kenny Fries; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*

Films:

*At First Sight*; *Children of a Lesser God*

Week Five:

“Heroism, Pathos, and Romantic Culture”

Readings: Selections from *The Cinema of Isolation*; Selections from *Enforcing Normalcy*; Selections from *On Meaning Making*

Film:

*The Deer Hunter*

Week Six:

“Graphein: Writing on the Body”

Readings: Selections from Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*; Selections from *Staring Back*; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*; Selections from *The Cinema of Isolation* Selections from Carson McCullers

Film:

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Week Seven:

“Death and the Crippled Body”

Readings: Selections from *Nancy Mairs*; Selections from *The Cinema of Isolation*; Selections from *Oedipus Rex*; Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader* Selections from *Aids as Metaphor*

Film:

*Philadelphia*

Week Eight:

“(Re)Visioning”

Readings: Selections from *Staring Back*; Georgina Kleege; Kenny Fries; Selected articles from “The Ragged Edge”

Film:

*When Billy Broke His Head*

*Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*

Week Nine:

Visible and Invisible: Issues of Figuration”

Readings: Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*; Selections from Lauren Slater and William Styron

Film:

*Depression: Fighting the Dragon*

Week Ten:

“The Onward Way: Reflections on Victimization”

Readings: Selections from *The Disability Studies Reader*; Nancy Mairs; *Staring Back* Articles from “The Ragged Edge”

Films:

“Passion Fish”

“Still/Here”

### **Course Requirements:**

Students are required to write 3 short essays (4 pp each) as well as a semester long on-line viewing journal. Additionally students will be assigned specific dates on which they will lead in-class discussion about the readings and films.

**Grades:**

The three papers will count for 75 per cent of the total course grade. The on-line viewing journal and in class presentations will constitute the remaining 25 per cent of the total grade.

**Meeting Schedule:**

This is a course in film and literature and students must be prepared to meet three times per week. We will have two class discussion and lecture meetings per week as well as a weekly film screening. All meetings are required.