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O'Brien's Development as a Thinker and a Writer

The society defines a person as someone who can take major responsibilities required for self-directed life. For Mark O'Brien, being disabled made him think that he did not fit the definition of a human being as indicated above. For the first times, he felt that he did not have control over anything. This essay explores the concept of disability in literature through an analysis of Mark O'Brien's text *How I became a Human Being* through examination of "ideology of ability," a theoretical concept from Tobin Seiber's book on Disability Theories. For O'Brien, the paralysis that got him at the age of six denied him many childhood opportunities. However, in his attempt to obtain independence, O'Brien used what he was in control of his mouthstick and mind. This essay argues that Mark O'Brien, despite being disabled, challenged his disabled body by deconstructing the "ideology of ability" theory through his writing, Mark O'Brien disputes cultural stigmas and celebrates disability as a source of strength and creativity.

First, O'Brien demonstrates his development as a thinker and as a writer through the deconstruction of the "ideology of ability" through which he challenges the cultural stigmas. As Tobin Seibers explains in his explanation of "ideology of disability theory" that disabled people are cast as narcissistic malingerers. In his opinion, the decision to "pass or not pass" as able-bodied is a political ideology created by disabled people (Seibers 100). Seibers believes that despite that experiences are constructed through the social attitudes and prejudices, the individual's identity produced within such conditions can be real and valid for, the purpose of,

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social interactions. In other words, Seibers believes that it is possible for a disabled person to adopt a social constructionist theory of experience without breaching the legal provisions based on such knowledge.

For O'Brien, starting to write was not easy due to the challenges and social constructionist ideas that surrounded his condition. Being disabled at the age of six, he could no longer enjoy the things he used to when he was a child; for instance "ran down the front steps of our brown-and-yellow house, into the life of our crowded, Irish-Catholic neighborhood" (O'Brien 7). However, after being in a coma for thirty days, O'Brien woke up paralyzed from the neck down and separated from his family (20). O'Brien thought that his world was coming to an end. Despite that he became isolated from his family and home; O'Brien started to pick up his life while still at the hospital. Against all the odds of cultural stigma associated with paralysis and disability, O'Brien started to get involved in reading. He recalls one of the doctor's remarks that demonstrated the public's perception on the disabled. He knew that the "doctor's tone said it meant 'coward'" (O'Brien 27). The doctor is a representation of the general public's perception in the book. For O'Brien, his remarks were "torturing" him (27). O'Brien depicts the kinds of psychological torture, stigmatization, and discrimination that disabled people have to contend with in the society.

Seeing how people looked at him, O'Brien tried to prove them wrong by taking his studies seriously. He says that "looking at catalogs, comic books, and illustrated astronomy books stirred my interest in reading" (O'Brien & Gillian 24). He developed an interest in reading at first grade.

Through the deconstruction of the ideology of disability, O'Brien demonstrates strength and creativity through writing. Seibers' ideology of disability argues that the purpose of an

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organization is to “give the disabled individuals greater knowledge of and control over their bodies in situations where increased knowledge and control are possible” (27). Seibers’ theory of ideology of disability demonstrates how disabled people can transform their assumptions about identity, thinking, and meaning of the body.

For O’Brien, realizing that he could not do much due to his disability, he started developing an interest in writing. His interest in writing first emerged when he first wrote his letter to Pete. He says that that letter he wrote to Pete was his “sole written communication beyond schoolwork,” otherwise all his writing remained in his mind (56). After Pete asked him to write him a letter, he did not have the writing materials, but he could move his right thumb a little (55). Despite that he was paralyzed and did not have the writing tools, O’Brien creatively found a way to communicate with Pete through writing. This was the first step towards his writing. He also demonstrates critical thinking capabilities through the help of some of the people closest to him like Pete. He talks about how Pete talked to him about developing his mind, “not in terms of going to college but in terms of reading and thinking” (55). O’Brien’s interest in writing developed and changed from the time he realized that he could use his mouthstick and mind to communicate with people. His first letter to Pete, which he dictated to his mother, Helen, showed him that he could be much more than just a dependent individual. This was his first step towards achieving independence. Watching television also provided O’Brien with a different perspective as he realized that he wanted to write and to become more independent.

Lastly, through the deconstruction of the ideology of ability, O’Brien depicts how he celebrates disability as a source of creativity. For Seibers, disability is more than the ideas built on the social environment that influence the way people understand and perceive concepts

related to disability. According to Siebers, society thinks that a human being is abled only when he or she can fit into a category that those who can. In case one does not fit into this category he or she is considered abnormal or not fully human or beings that are fallen from the “baseline of humanness” (Siebers 10). In his opinion, the baseline of humanness is related to the human body and minds that “gives or denies human status to individual persons” (10). Since all human beings have a consciousness that is determined by the specific social norm, those they come in contact with, and preconceived social recognition. For O’Brien, being disabled was not the end of his world. As Thomas Couser explains his personal development may have been “delayed by his condition, which rendered him a shut-in as a child,” but he learned to overcome his helplessness that was “hard to transcend” (185). In his second part of the book, which he highlights the move to achieving independence, O’Brien recounts the attainment of autonomy despite that he was still a disabled person.

He is seen to celebrate his disability as he hires and directs those who attended to his diverse needs (Couser 186). After passing through many tribulations in his childhood, O’Brien started to realize that “he was not the monster he saw in his mind” (Couser 186). As Couser explains, O’Brien’s journey to writing may have been enhanced by his confinement, which encouraged “introspection and reflection, preparing him, all unaware for his career” as a writer (186).

Different aspects of O’Brien’s life as a writer connected to his disability. For instance, his status as a graduate could be read as a form of disability to some extent. As a disabled person, O’Brien is supposed to be dependent, incomplete, and have an incompetent body. However, he manages to deconstruct the ideology of disability by trying to achieve independence through writing. For instance, he was paid for his first writing after graduating with a BA in English at Berkley. In

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one example O'Brien attempted to seek answers from a physicist, Stephen Hawking at Berkley campus. He asked the physicist what he would say to "all the disabled people who are stuck in nursing homes or living with their parents or in some untenable situation" (O'Brien & Gillian 230). Despite his disability and inaccessibility, O'Brien grew and adapted socially as well as emotionally. He wrote his first written material through dictation to his mother but later adapted to mouthstick and mind to fulfill the significant responsibilities that required self-directed life.

In conclusion, being paralyzed from the neck down to polio at the age of six may have locked many opportunities for O'Brien, but it also created some for him. In his text *How I became a Human Being*, O'Brien narrates how he passed through tribulations including the social stigma and inaccessibility as well as how he managed to overcome the challenges. Based on Tobin Siebers' ideology of disability theory, this essay has analyzed the development of O'Brien as a writer and a thinker through the way he started his first writing, how his writing developed and changed over time, and how he achieved independence through writing. O'Brien proved that society might have determined how the disabled people should be perceived, but for those who can use learning organizations to get higher knowledge and control over their bodies like him, disability provides them with strength and creativity that helps them overcome the stigma, dependency and psychological torture.

Works Cited

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