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Disabled people have always been represented in dramatic literature. However, the appearance of disabled characters prior to the mid 20th century may be considered primarily in terms of their dramatic functionality and symbolic value rather than representing any explorations of disability itself. Tiresias, for example, is an embodiment of the proverb that ‘there are none so blind as those who will not see’, while Richard III’s deformity and both Lear’s and Hamlet’s ‘madness’ are manifestations of ‘something being rotten in the state’ as a result of the ‘natural order’, or ‘great chain of being’ having been disturbed.

This chapter explores what young people might learn about disability through the dramatic literature they may encounter in the school curriculum or theatre which is available to young audiences. Any such discussion is likely to be controversial not least because the language associated with disability is highly contested. For example, in the world of education the term ‘special needs’ is used as an umbrella (some might say euphemism) for physical disability, cognitive impairment and mental illness. It can also be used to refer to people of such intelligence or giftedness that they fall outside of what is perceived as the ‘normal range’, yet ‘normality’ is itself a problematic term, though a feature of many successful dramas lies in the way notions of normality are challenged or inverted. Indeed, the arts world tends to embraces the term ‘disability’ in order to establish an aesthetic which can directly counter ablist agendas that either ignore its existence or simply doesn’t know how to engage with it for fear of seeming patronising, ignorant or offensive. The question is, to what extent does dramatic literature provide young people with insights into the lives of people who are disabled and society’s response to them?

The invisibility of disability in pre-twentieth century dramatic literature is hardly surprising given the way those who were disabled have been treated in the past and continue to be treated in many places. In England, for example, it was not until 1893 that school boards were instructed to provide education for children who were blind or deaf (Barnard, 1947, p. 223). Six years later the Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act directed that children ‘not being imbecile and not being merely dull and backward’ should be provided for in special classes (Tansley & Gulliford, 1960, p. 3). In the USA a ‘free and appropriate education for all handicapped children’ wasn’t mandated until 1975: before then, some 4,000,000 children with disabilities did not receive the necessary support and another 1,000,000 received no schooling whatsoever (Connor & Ferri, 200, p. 63). The inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools continues to be a contentious
issue (Ainscow & Booth, 1998; Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009) with the result that what many young people learn about disability from dramatic representations may go unmoderated by any first-hand experience.

Perhaps the most commonly studied piece of literature in which the protagonist has an identifiable disability is Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck wrote the story in such a way that it could be read as either a novel or a play. It was first performed on stage in 1937, the same year that it was published as a novel. It is the story of Lennie, a gentle giant with the mind of an innocent child, and his friend George who attempts to protect him from a cruel and unsympathetic world. A common reading of the narrative would be a liberal humanist one in which George’s final act of killing Lennie is seen as a compassionate and selfless ‘act of kindness’. However, it could equally be argued that the characterisation of Lennie as a victim imparts a negative view of those with learning difficulties in that, ultimately, he becomes a burden that is simply too great for George to bear. Such a reading is cognate with the argument expressed by Snyder and Mitchel (2001) that disability has persistently been used to bolster ablist discourses and ideological frameworks. But the play may be considered in other ways. For example, it may be seen as a metaphor for American society in that Lennie and George live in a land built on the principle that dreams can come true. However, like Willy Loman in Miller’s Death of a Salesman, it is clear that not all dreams do come true and that the ‘best laid plans o’ mice and men gang aft agley.’ The fact that the play/novel was banned by some state and school libraries for promoting euthanasia and holding an anti-capitalist stance supports the notion that the world of Lennie and George may indeed be a metonymic representation of American society.

Of Mice and Men is a useful touchstone in that its depiction of a disability may be interpreted in different ways, each of which may be employed in discussions of other plays depicting characters with some form of impairment. In the first instance, it is worthy of consideration because the story is so commonly studied in schools (albeit most usually in the form of a novel rather than a play) even though it was not written specifically for a young audience. Other plays that have appeared on examination syllabuses in England would include The Glass Menagerie in which Laura is depicted as both emotionally and physically ‘crippled’; Peter Nichols’ tragi-comic exploration of the challenges faced by parents trying to look after their profoundly and multipli-disabled daughter in A Day in the Death of Joe Egg; Peter Shaffer’s dramatisation of an apparently true (though actually unverified) story of an emotionally disturbed teenager in Equus; and Brian Clark’s dramatic moral debate on euthanasia for those left paralysed after an accident, Whose Life is it Anyway? In the context of curriculum study, students are likely to be required to focus on the text as a piece of literature and discuss narrative, structure and character development. Alternatively, they may be required to consider what is involved in moving from page to stage, how to play the characters and how to achieve dramatic impact. What the plays may be saying about disability and responses to it tend to remain largely undiscussed in such a context. Is this, in itself, a manifestation of an ablist agenda that cares only to view disability through the lens of objectified study? Or is it a result of teachers simply not knowing quite how to open up the issues for discussion?