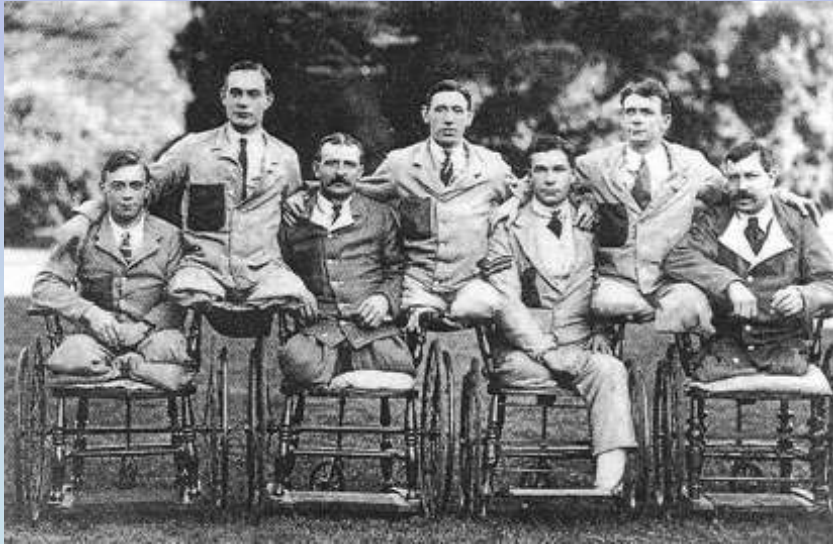


Representation of Disabled People in the Western Media

Dr Laurence Clark

**A History of
Disabled People's Oppression
in Western Society**

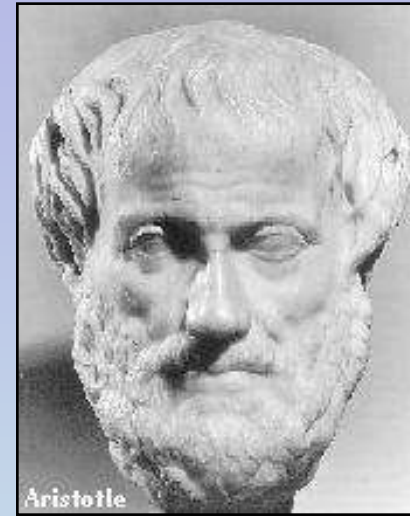
Historical Perspective



- There are many strange beliefs about difference.
- Different cultures react differently.
- Many see impairment as a punishment from God.
- Western ideas are dominated by Greek and Roman ideals.

Ancient Times

- Ancient Greek and Roman culture was dominated by ideas of 'the body beautiful'
- Aristotle advised getting rid of a child if it was imperfect.



- The Olympic Games, in honour of the gods, celebrated physical prowess and perfection – Disabled athletes are still segregated today.

Judaic / Christian ideas have also shaped our thinking about...



Charity



Cures

Gargoyles

- Hideous, deformed, Gargoyles decorated the outside of churches to keep evil at bay
- Inside churches, idealised images showed angels and saints with unblemished bodies and faces.



Feudal and Medieval Times

- Disabled children were seen as the devil's substitutes.
- “Take the changling child to the river and drown it.” – *Martin Luther*



The Renaissance



- Duke Frederico Urbino was always painted in profile. Why? Because he had a facial disfigurement on the other side of his face.

Richard III



- An X-ray proved that this hump was added 60 years after his death.
- Sir Thomas Moore invented a 'limp' and 'withered arm'
- Shakespeare describes him as 'scarce half made-up'
- Sir Ian McKellen added a visual impairment in one eye and a sagging face



The Industrial Revolution

- The Poor Law (1601) encouraged keeping disabled people in the community with relief provided.
- But with industry came the view that disabled people were unproductive.
- The Poor Law was changed in 1834 to deny relief outside of prisons, hospitals, asylums etc...

The Eugenics Movement

- In the early 20^h century a number of scientists, writers and politicians applied Darwinian theories to society:



TS
Eliot



Virginia
Woolf



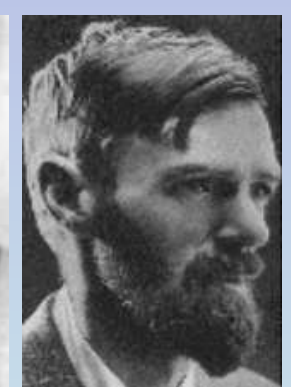
HG
Wells



Aldous
Huxley



WB
Yeats



DH
Lawrence

Who said this?

“The unnatural and increasingly rapid growth of the feeble-minded classes, coupled with the steady restriction among all the thrifty, energetic and superior stocks constitutes a race danger. I feel that the source from which the stream of madness is fed should be cut off and sealed up before another year has passed.”

Winston Churchill MP, 1910

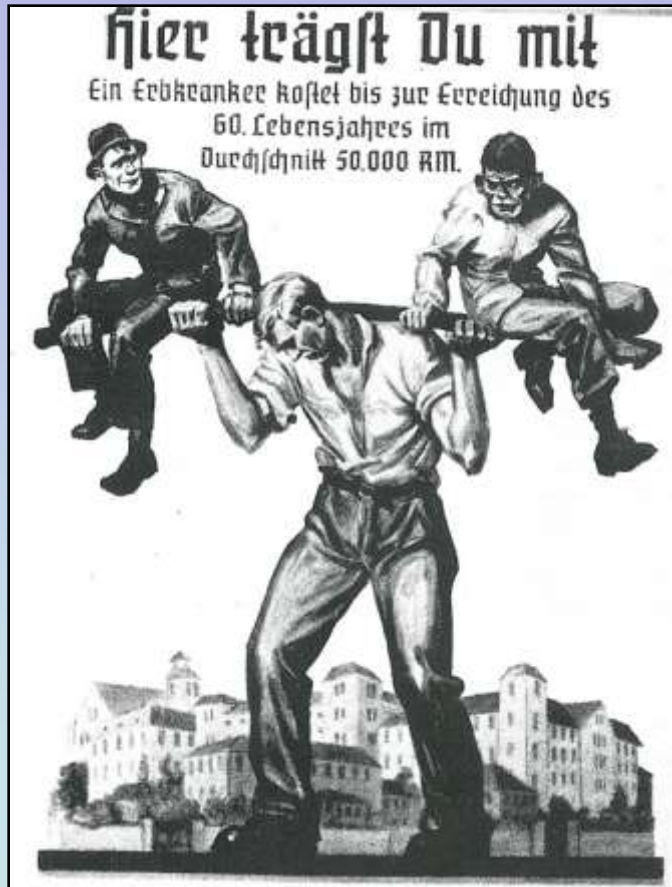


Franklin D Roosevelt

- Had polio in both legs and was unable to walk unaided
- He insisted on never being photographed in his wheelchair
- “The American public would never vote for a president who was a cripple” – FDR



Getting Rid of 'Useless Eaters'



Number of disabled people killed = 250,000

Segregation

Sheltered Workshops

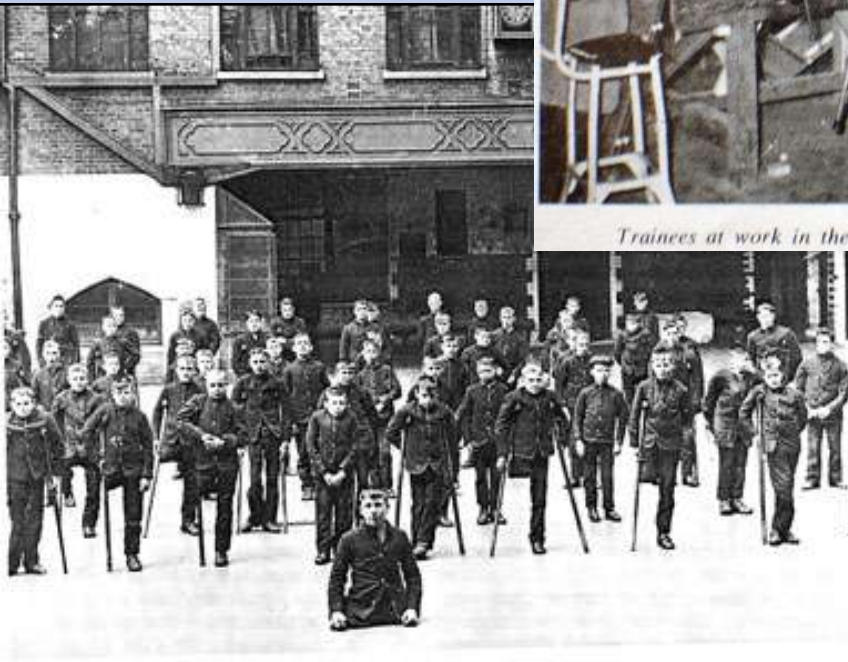


Trainees at work in the NSS

Special Schools



Care Homes



Achievements



Better
Working
Conditions

BSL
Recognition



The
DDA

Direct
Payments



Historical Myths and Stereotypes

- Pitiabile / Shameful
- Victims
- Sinister and Evil
- Charity
- Cure
- Laughable
- A Burden
- Asexual
- Segregation

The Medical and Social Models of Disability

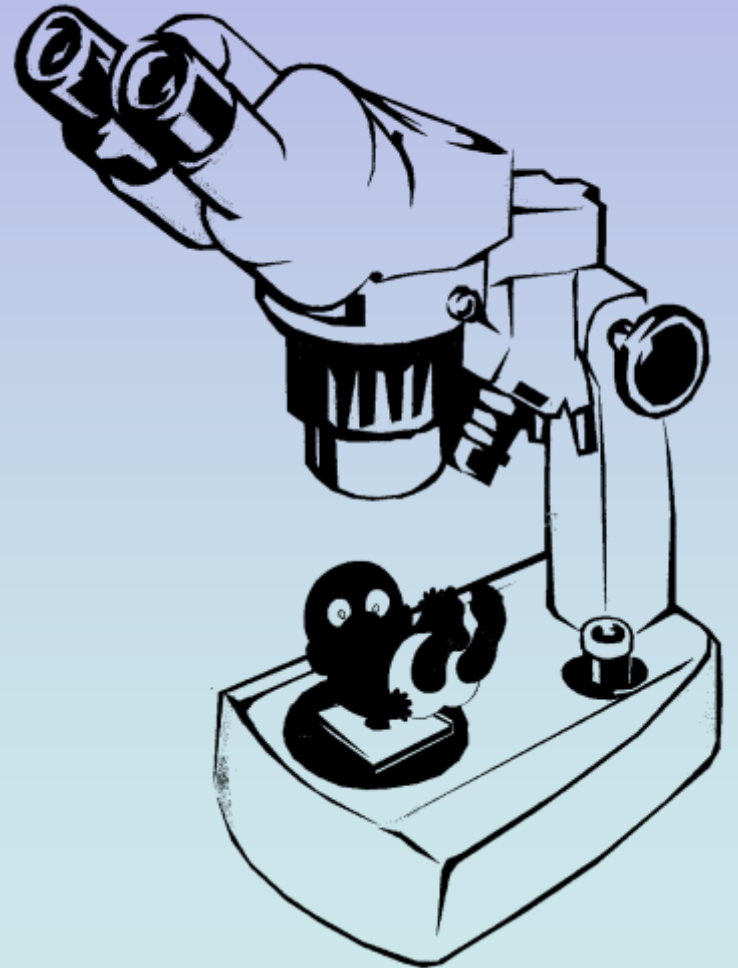
The Medical Model



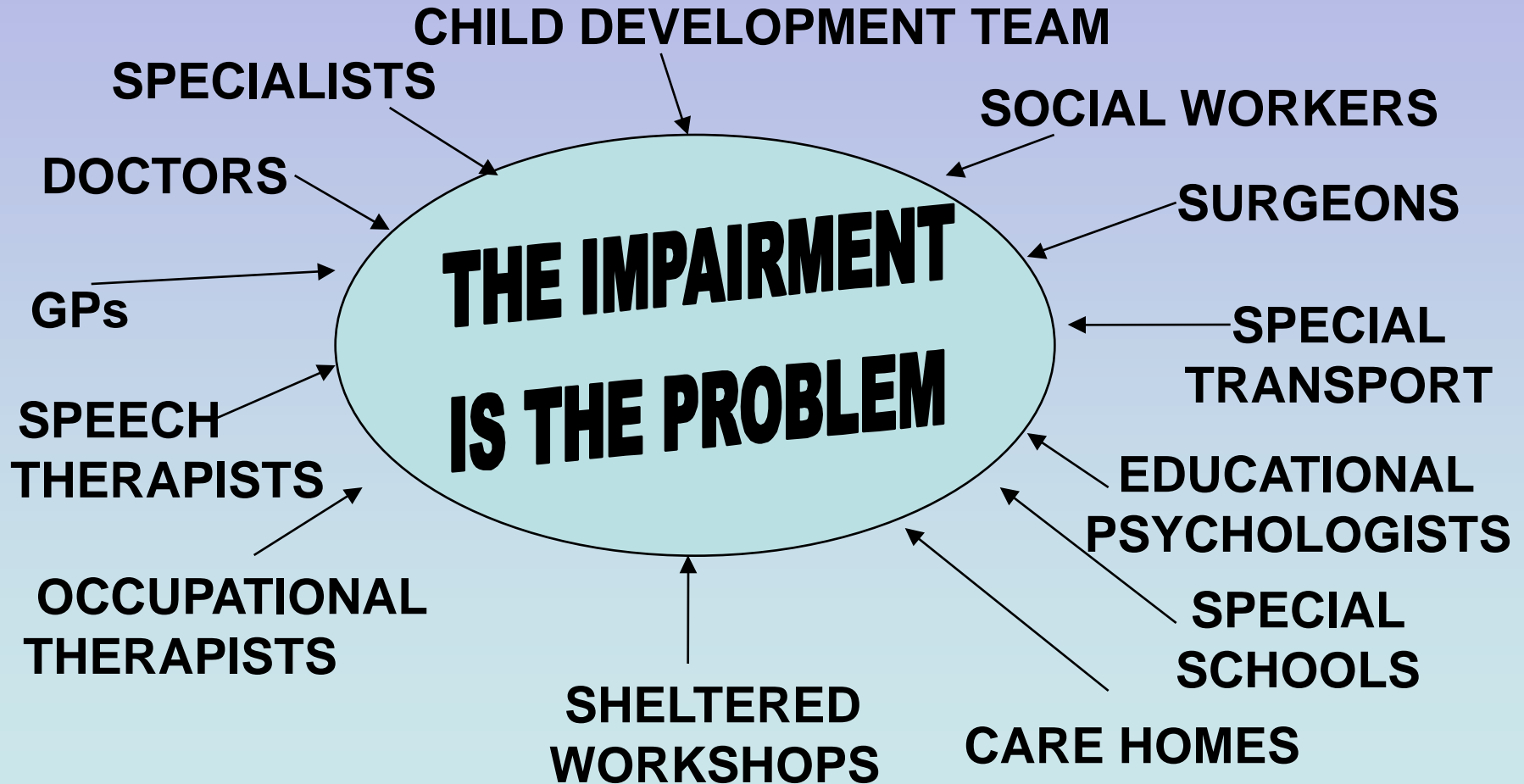
- **Disabled People are excluded because of issues to do with the functioning of their mind, bodies or senses.**
- This is the traditional way of thinking about disability.
- States that 'impairment' is the root cause of exclusion.

A Medical Model Assessment

**What
can't
they do?**



The Effects of the Medical Model



The Social Model



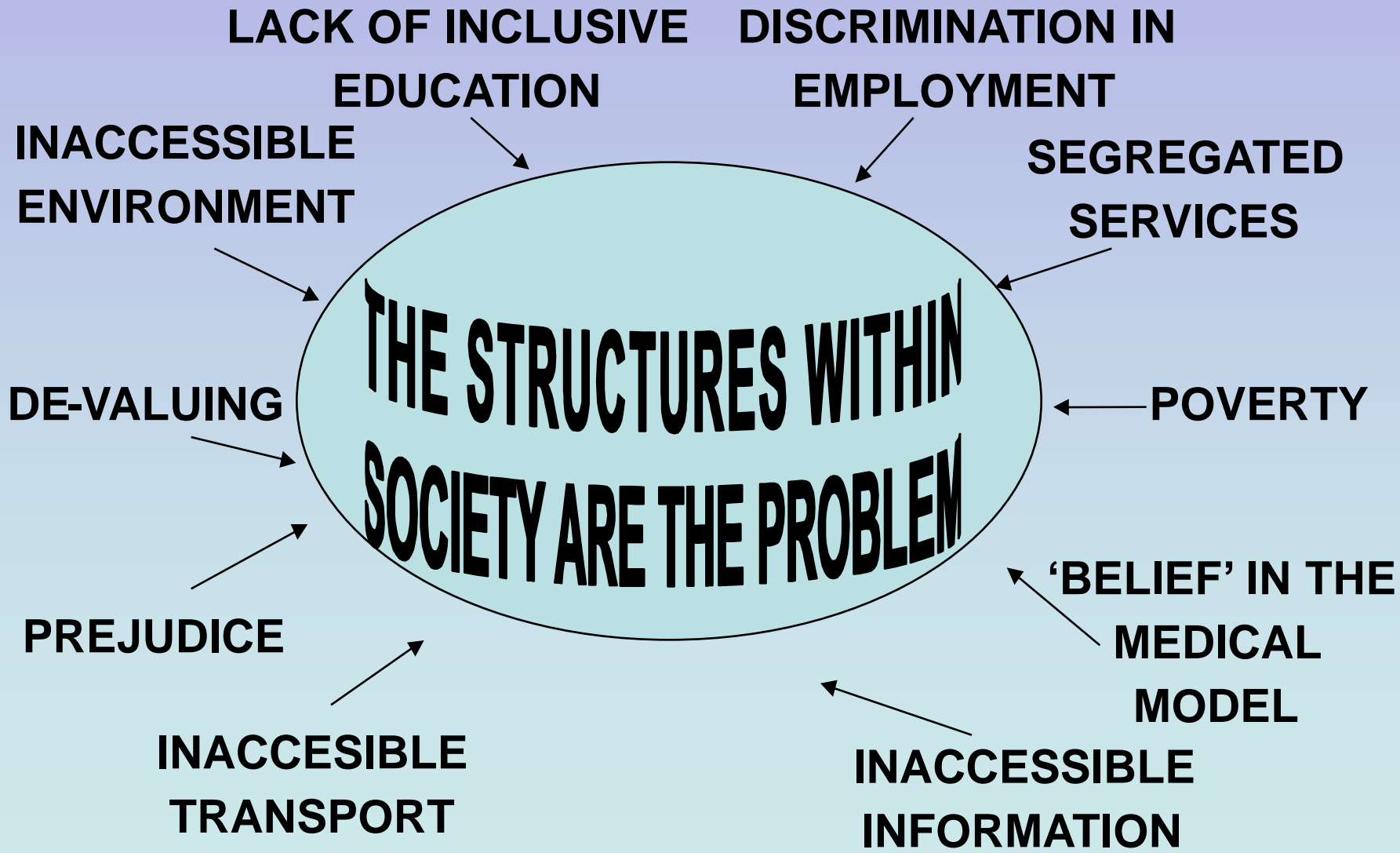
- **Impairment:**

“the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long-term / permanent basis.”

- **Disability:**

“the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the community on an equal level with others because of physical and social barriers.”

The Social Model



The social model says...

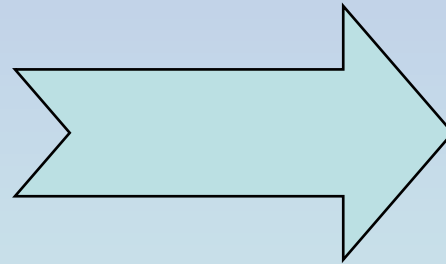
- **Disability** is the loss, limitation or denial of rights by society, to a point where someone is restricted or completely excluded
- **Disability** is an experience, not a medical condition
- **A Disabled Person** has an impairment, not a disability

What does this mean in practice?

- Focus of work shifts to removing disabling barriers.
- Requires you to address discrimination by examining policies, systems, procedures and practices

Ten Action Points of Independent Living

1. Information
2. Peer Support
3. Housing
4. Technical Aids
5. Personal Assistance
6. Transport
7. Access
8. Income
9. Education & Training
10. Employment



Images in Children's Literature

Heidi



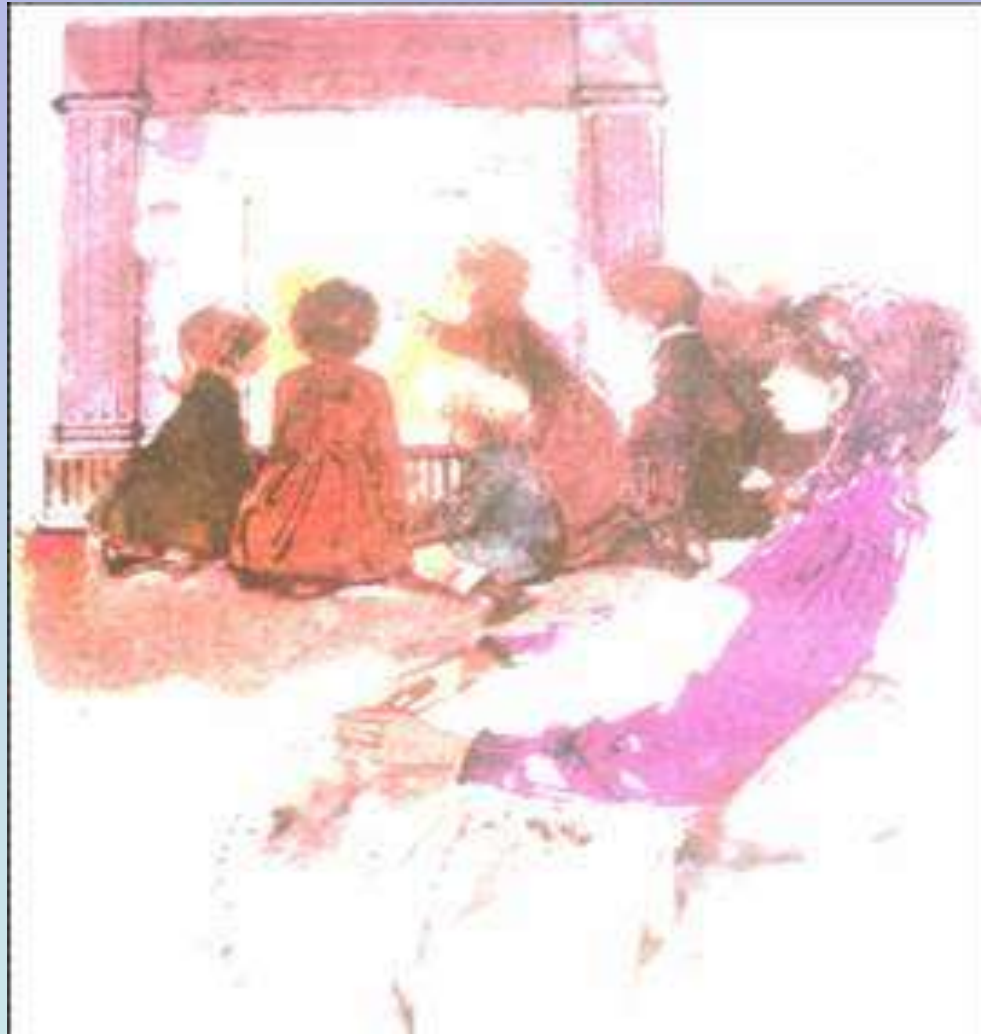
The Secret Garden



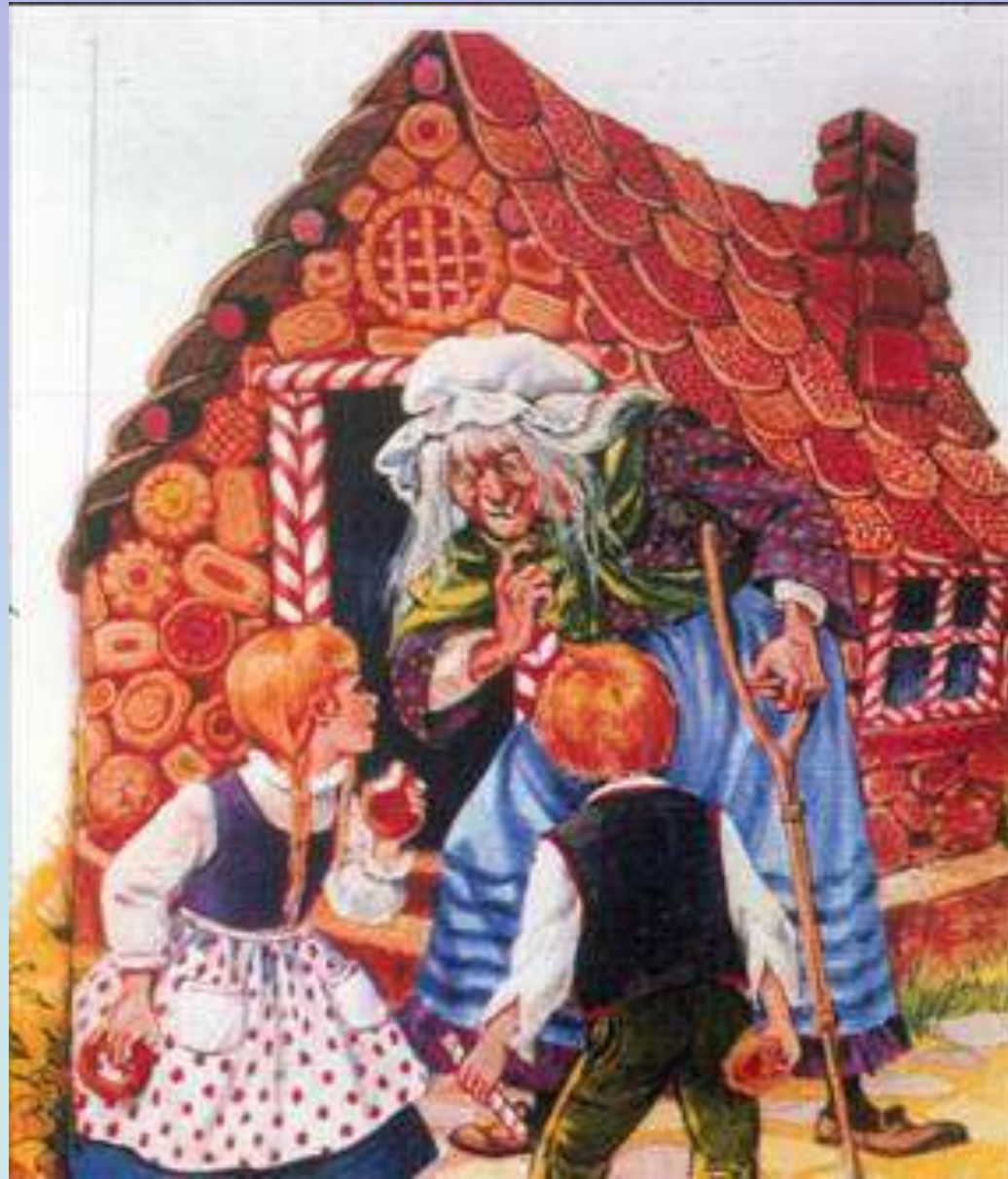
Rapunzel



What Katy Did



Hanzel and Gretel



Snow White

Snow White gets up.
She sees the seven dwarfs.
Please help me, she says.
The queen wants to kill me.

You can live here with us,
say the dwarfs.
Snow White thanks
the dwarfs.



Rumpelstiltskin



Treasure Island



Long John Silver

Images at the Cinema – a brief history

The Automobile Accident (1904)



A disabled actor and his able-bodied lookalike take direction in The Automobile Accident, a turn-of-the-century comedy. This Gaumont effort was one of many early films whose appeal hinged on the physical difference of its disabled performer.

Freaks (1932)



I Accuse (1938)



The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)



The Men (1950)



One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)



Children of a Lesser God (1984)



Rain Man (1988)



Born on the 4th of July (1989)



Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994)



Health and Safety Advert

IAN WASN'T KILLED IN A BUILDING SITE ACCIDENT. HE JUST LOST HIS LIFE.

When Ian Whittingham fell through the roof he was working on, his whole world fell apart too. He is now rebuilding his life. But just like the thousands of accidents that happen in the building trade each year, Ian's could have easily been avoided. Think about what's at risk. Check how safe your workplace is before you start work. Or it could be the last job you ever do. For more information call HSE on 0845 301 9000. **SITE SAFETY. IT'S DOWN TO US ALL.**



Stereotypes of Disabled People in Western Media

10 Media Stereotypes

- Pitiabile
- Victim
- Sinister and Evil
- Freakish
- Triumph Over Tragedy
- Comical
- Chip on Shoulder
- Burden / Outcast
- Incapable of Relationships
- Unseen

From BIKLEN, D. and BOGDANA, R. (1977) 'Media Portrayal of Disabled People: A Study of Stereotypes' Inter-Racial Children's Book Bulletin, 8, 6 and 7, pp. 4-9.

Pitiable

- A regular feature of popular fiction is overtly dependent Disabled People
- Often included in storylines to depict another character's goodness and sensitivity.
- Frequently portrayed as especially endearing to elicit even greater feelings of sentimentality.
- This is often accompanied by emotive terms like victim and sufferer.

Pitiable - Examples

Tiny Tim



Elephant Man



It might have been
YOUR CHILD!

Look happy enough, don't they? You're right. These kids are happy—as happy as broken legs and ears can make them. You'd hardly guess they had a position. There's something you ought to know about them. Something the pictures against life itself. A race against time, Make an mistake. These kids are yours—*anybody's*. SO TURN THE PAGE.

Charity Advertisements

Victims

- In reality Disabled People are often subject to violent abuse
- Media portrayals contribute to the mistaken belief that disabled people are totally helpless and dependent
- Such imagery helps perpetuate this violence.
- Reinforces notions of 'survival of the fittest' and Social Darwinism.

Victims - Examples



Whatever Happened to
Baby Jane?

Wait
Until Dark



Red
Dragon



Evil

- One of the most persistent stereotypes and a major obstacle to inclusion.
- 'The Bible' contains over forty instances in which 'the cripple' is connected to sin and sinners.
- Shakespeare portrays Richard III as twisted in both body and mind.

Evil - Examples



Hook



James
Bond



Freddie
Krueger



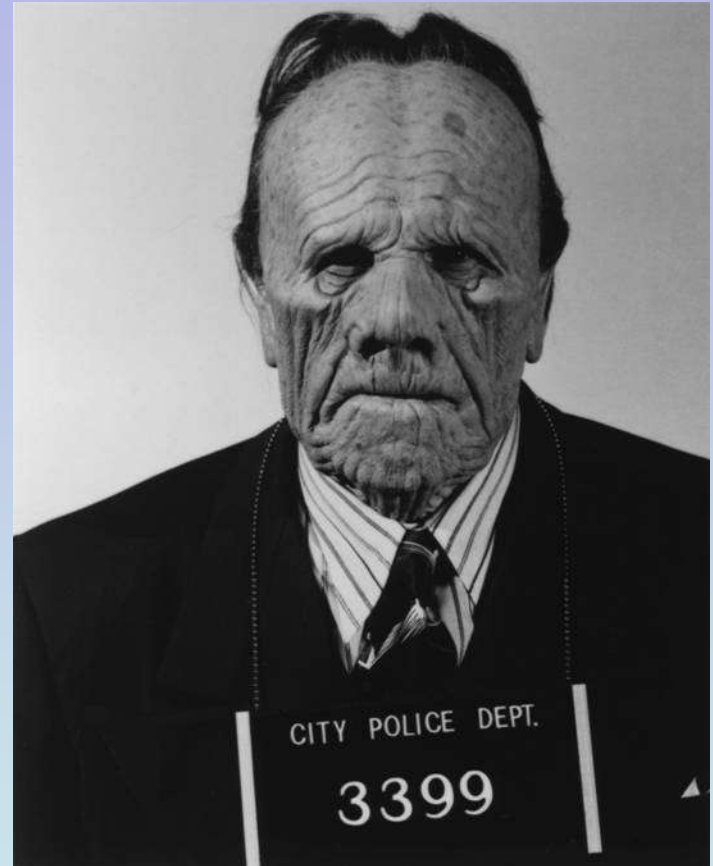
Freakish

- Disabled people are included in the storylines to enhance the atmosphere, usually one of menace, mystery or deprivation.
- Or to add character to the visual impact of the production.
- This dilutes the humanity of disabled people by reducing them to objects of curiosity.

Freakish - Examples



Fritz in Boris Karloff's
Frankenstein



Pruneface in
Dick Tracy

Over-Achievers

- The Disabled Person is assigned super-human abilities.
- Blind people are portrayed as visionaries with a sixth sense or extremely sensitive hearing.
- Alternatively relatively ordinary achievements are excessively praised.

Over-Achievers - Examples



Scent of a Woman



Forrest Gump

Comical

- Shakespeare has a 'fool / clown' for light relief.
- Elizabethan joke books were full of jokes about people with every type of impairment imaginable.
- During the 17th & 18th centuries, wealthy people kept 'idiots' as objects of humour.
- Visits to Bedlam and other institutions were a typical form of entertainment.

Comical - Examples



Ken in 'A Fish Called Wanda'



Mini-Me in
'Austin Powers'

Chip on Shoulder

- The media sometimes portray Disabled People as 'self-pitiers' or our own worst enemy.
- This implies we could overcome our difficulties if we stopped feeling sorry for ourselves, think positively and rise to 'the challenge'.

Examples – Chip on Shoulder



Dr No



Candyman



Moby Dick

Burden / Outcast

- Views Disabled People as helpless and needing to be 'cared' for by non-disabled people
- Ignores the fact that Disabled People can achieve autonomy and independence with appropriate support.
- Implies that Disabled People's needs are different to everyone else, and that meeting those needs is a drain on society's resources.

Examples – Burden / Outcast



A Day in the
Death of Joe Egg



Snow White

Incapable of Relationships

- A common theme in literature and art
- Named 'the Chatterley Syndrome' after D H Lawrence's book.

Examples – Incapable of Relationships



The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Unseen

- Disabled People were rarely shown as productive members of the community; as students, as teachers, as part of the work-force or as parents.
- Disabled characters are often played by non-disabled actors.
- The absence of realistic portrayals implies that Disabled People should be segregated.
- The major British TV companies have now pledged to put more Disabled People on TV.

Positive Portrayals of Disabled People

The Way Forward

1. Shun one-dimensional characterisations. Portray disabled people as having complex personalities.
2. Avoid depicting us as always receiving.
3. Avoid presenting physical and mental characteristics as determining personality.

The Way Forward

4. Refrain from depicting us as objects of curiosity . Make us ordinary.
5. Our impairments should not be ridiculed or made the butt of jokes.
6. Avoid sensationalising us especially as victims or perpetrators of violence.
7. Refrain from endowing us with superhuman attributes.

The Way Forward

8. Avoid making our attitude the problem. Show the barriers we face that keep us from living full lives.
9. Avoid showing disabled people as incapable of relationships.

The Way Forward

10. Show us as an ordinary part of life in all forms of representation.
11. Most importantly cast us as, train us and write us into your scripts, programmes and publications.

Sources

Colin Barnes (1993) **Disabling Imagery And The Media**. Available to download from Disability Archive UK at the University of Leeds:

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk>

Richard Rieser (2004) **Disabling Imagery: A teaching guide to disability and moving image media**. BFI / Disability Equality in Education. Available at:

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