

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

# Directed Study Unit

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DBS 5004

The representation of disability in *Game of Thrones*

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## 1. Introduction

*Game of Thrones* is a fantasy drama television adaptation created by David Benioff and Dan B. Weiss, (IMDb, 2017) based on the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* written by George R. R. Martin (HBO, 2017). The story is set in the fictitious land of Westeros and revolves around the noble houses in this land and the politics involved in the fight for the throne (IMDb, 2017). *Game of Thrones* is described by Adi (2012) as an epic fantasy genre since it depicts a surreal story which is presented as being set in the past, although the dates are never clearly specified. She argues that despite being based on fiction, the story was able to captivate a very wide audience by appealing to the reality which they understand.

Media most often represents disability within a binary framework whereby one either conquers or surrenders to disability so as to become either the hero or the villain (Haller & Preston, 2017), such as Jaime Sommers<sup>1</sup> in *Bionic Woman* (Quinlan & Bates, 2009) and Rumpelstiltskin<sup>2</sup> (Lambert, 2015), respectively. Adi (2012) also explains how epic fantasies typically portray problem-solving, physically endowed heroes who defeat the anti-hero characters for the prized princess. According to her, this is where *Game of Thrones* strays from the archetype since it presents many different main characters whose actions at times blur the line between hero and villain. Since this epic fantasy features a significant amount of main characters who have or who acquire a disability, it is worth analysing how their disability is narrated (Massie & Mayer, 2014).

With viewers reaching record-breaking proportions (Koblin, 2017), the representation of disabled characters in *Game of Thrones* is bound to have had some effects on its audience. For the purpose of this essay, reference will not be made to the book series, primarily due to the fact that the storyline of the television adaptation has progressed further than that of the novels, and hence, the characters' faith can be discussed with more retrospect. The first part of the paper will deal with the stereotypes of disability typically represented in media. It will then focus on characters who display some form of impairment and how their representation fits in with the stereotypes presented in the first section.

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<sup>1</sup> Jaime Sommers in *Bionic Woman*, is given surgical implants after a sky diving accident resulted in both her legs and one arm being amputated. With these implants she obtained superhuman qualities that enabled her to stop a secret organisation which was set to destroy the world, thereby depicting her as overcoming disability to become a hero (Quinlan & Bates, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> A fairy-tale villain defined by Lambert (2015) as “a monstrous imp” (p. 20) and a typical example of how physical deformity is paralleled to villainy.

## 2. Media and Stereotypes

When he first spoke of stereotypes, Lippman (1922/2004) stated that “we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (p. 44). Stereotypes are also described by Stangor and Schaller (2000) as social products shaped by what is presented to us through social agents, such as mass media. Tan, Zhang, Zhang and Dalisay (2009) explain that stereotypes are assimilated when one does not have actual encounters with minorities, and uses mass media as a source of information. Hence, Shakespeare (1999) argues that when the stereotypical representation of disabled people on film is not an accurate representation of the disability experience, it may add to the negative connotations surrounding disability, particularly when non-disabled actors play a disabled character.

Zhang and Haller (2013) found that people with disabilities perceived that mass media categorises them into three main models: the “supercrips, disadvantaged, or ill victims” (p. 329). While arguably the supercrip model can be considered as not being a negative representation (Zhang & Haller, 2013), it may still generate unachievable prospects for persons with disability (Quinlan & Bates, 2008). According to Quinlan and Bates (2009), the issue with disability representation in the media is that it has the potential to create “distorted views” (p. 49) as it most often depicts the abovementioned stereotypes. They also propose that portraying disabled people as being able to regain the normative standards imposed by society may lead to the disempowerment of disabled people if they cannot reach the same targets in the real world.

Nelson (1994) also points out that largely, the media has depicted disabled people as those who cannot live a wholesome and pleasant life. He proposes that while there have been improvements, disabled characters seem to always be defined by their impairment and their presence is most often there to add to the drama. He argues that for this “legacy of negativity” (p. 9) to subside, disabled characters need to be featured in television playing mundane roles. He adds that they should be defined by the roles they are playing and their disability should only be an “incidental facet” (p. 10). Donaldson (1981) agrees and adds that it is only when the media portrays disabled people in situations where they are still living fulfilled lives that it provides positive role models for disabled young people.

### **3. Disability in *Game of Thrones***

In the following section whether the representation of characters on the show who exhibit some form of physical or intellectual impairment reinforces or denies stereotypes will be discussed. Reference will be made to Rubin and Strauss Watson's (1987) list of stereotypes. The first section will explore how disability is portrayed in relation to villainy. Whilst other characters will also be mentioned, primary importance will be given to Tyrion Lannister due to the fact that he has a congenital impairment and is played by an actor who has the same disability. In the second section, the concept of disability as punishment will be explored in relation to Jaime Lannister, Arya Stark and Theon Greyjoy. Whilst other characters also sustain the experience of disability as retribution, since they are main characters who are featured frequently in the series, and for reasons of space, only these three characters will be analysed. The next three sections will focus on how the representation of Tyrion strays from stereotypes of violence, asexuality and humour. The pity and burden stereotype will then be presented by comparing Tyrion to Bran, which will then lead to the discussion of the supercrip stereotype and how disabled characters can be used as props by other characters.

#### **3.1. Disability and villainy**

When Goffman (1963) speaks of stigma he argues that physical appearance is enough for people to be classified as belonging to a particular social group. Within this social group they are also unconsciously attributed a set of anticipated demands which are expected out of their behaviour. He argues that failure to abide by these expected demands leads to the individual being considered as not being "whole" (p. 3), as being "tainted" (p. 3) and of bearing *stigma*. He proposes that one way in which stigma is exhibited is through *abominations of the body*. Within this theory, disabled persons whose physical appearance does not meet the normative expectations of what a human body should look like, bear stigma and are classified as belonging to a group of people deemed "less desirable...bad...dangerous, or weak" (p. 3). Lambert (2015) argues that typically, fantasy stories reinforce these stereotypes and portray villains as having deformities.

Having been born with achondroplasia, one character who from birth has been tainted with stigma due to an abomination of the body is Tyrion Lannister. Lambert (2015) argues that due to his stature, Tyrion is automatically perceived as evil or as not being whole as witnessed by the derogatory nicknames he is given, such as *The Imp* and *Halfman*. His reputation is made worse due to the fact that his mother died giving birth to him, making his

disability the punishment he deserves for simply being born (Massie & Mayer, 2014). This meant that even within his family, he has been regarded with hostility since birth, particularly by his father and sister. His father had admitted that “the day that you were born...I wanted to carry you into the sea and let the waves wash you away” (Benioff & Weiss, 2013, 00:11:49).

Despite the way Tyrion is treated by his family and by society, to the audience he is not presented as being evil. Since the very beginning of the series, Tyrion is seen using his strong disabled identity to empower other disabled characters and to educate non-disabled ones. Massie and Mayer (2014) explain that Tyrion has internalised the way in which an ableist society marginalises disabled people and tries to advocate others to accept who they are as a way of making them feel stronger. They argue that Tyrion seems to make it one of his missions to pass on a message that autonomy can only come by embracing and accepting one’s condition. Tyrion identifies himself as belonging to the social group of “cripples, bastards and broken things” (Benioff, Weiss & Kirk, 2011, 00:04:55) and hence when he meets Jon Snow, an illegitimate child of a noble Lord, and Bran Stark, a paraplegic boy, he tries to empower them.

When he meets Jon Snow, Tyrion finds him alone outside whilst the rest of his family are inside having a banquet with the King. Jon is frequently isolated due to his illegitimacy but Tyrion tries to empower him and tells him to “never forget what you are, the rest of the world will not. Wear it like armour and it can never be used to hurt you” (Benioff, Weiss & Van Patten, 2011, 00:43:11). Having this interaction between Jon and Tyrion occurring on the outside of the building can be seen as a reflection of how disabled people and illegitimate children used to be cut off from society. Furthermore, along with this strong disabled identity, Tyrion also brings with him positive messages founded on the social model of disability (Ellis, 2014). When he first meets Bran, who incurred a spinal injury through a fall and as a result could not walk or ride, Tyrion is quick to dismiss the fact that the child is no longer able to ride a horse simply because he lost the use of his legs. When interjected by the Maester<sup>3</sup> who informs Tyrion about the loss of power in Bran’s leg, Tyrion quickly retorts, “What of it? With the right horse and saddle even a cripple can ride” (Benioff, Weiss & Kirk, 2011, 00:04:23). Tyrion eventually supplies Bran with the design for an adapted saddle which enables him to ride his horse independently. As Ellis (2014) states, with this action, Tyrion puts forward the idea that with adequate environmental adaptations and adaptive equipment

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<sup>3</sup> A Maester is most often present in every noble house and one of his chief roles is tending to the medical needs of the members of the noble house (“Maesters”, n.d.).

disabled people can independently take part in daily activities. In other words, he shifted the problem away from the disabled person onto the disabling society, thereby promoting the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2017).

Tyrion is also shown to be compassionate towards Sansa Stark on the night of their forced, politically arranged marriage. Despite being forced to “wed her, bed her and put a child in her” (Benioff, Weiss & Graves, 2013, 00:54:38), Tyrion refuses to consummate the marriage and tells her that “I won’t share your bed, not until you want me to” (Benioff, Weiss & MacLaren, 2013, 00:42:08). Within the context of *Game of Thrones*, even though it is presented as gendered violence, the raping of wives has frequently been part of the show<sup>4</sup> and accepted to be within the husband’s rights (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017). Ferreday (2015) argues that in this show women seem to consent to sex only if they are sex workers or as a way to gain power and advance socially. This is particularly highlighted when Queen Cersei tells Sansa that “tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon, the best one is between your legs” (Benioff, Weiss & Marshall, 2012, 00:31:44). Hence, by defying his father’s orders and not taking advantage of Sansa, Tyrion shows that he is compassionate, courageous and with a firm sense of morality (Donnelly, 2016).

Whilst Tyrion’s kindness towards women may be interpreted as a result of lack of masculinity, given the tendency of some male characters to mistreat women, he is not the only one to display respect and loyalty towards women. Eddard Stark is displayed as a man of honour with very firm morality (“Eddard Stark”, n.d.). Despite being in an arranged marriage with Catelyn, their relationship is portrayed as a loving one (“Eddard and Catelyn Stark”, n.d.). In the tenth episode of season two, Robb Stark marries a woman he fell in love with disregarding the arrangement of marriage he had made with a war ally; a decision which ultimately led to his pregnant spouse, his mother and his own murder. Furthermore, in episode four of the first season, Jon Snow confesses that he had never been intimate with a woman even though his brothers had once paid for a prostitute. He explains that since he was an illegitimate child he did not want to risk getting the prostitute pregnant and bestow upon an innocent child the burden of being born out of wedlock. These three men are all portrayed as being rather masculine particularly as they are regarded as excellent fighters. Hence, it can

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<sup>4</sup> In the first episode of season one, fourteen year old Daenerys, is politically sold by her brother to Khal Drogo who raped her as soon as the wedding ceremony ended. In the third episode of season four, even though they are in a consensual incestuous relationship, Jaime forces himself on his sister Cersei after she refused to engage in sexual relations with him after their son was murdered. In the sixth episode of season five, Sansa was once again politically wed to Ramsey Bolton, who also raped her on their wedding night.

be said that within the socio-cultural context of *Game of Thrones*, being depicted as honourable towards women does not emasculate the character.

As Harnett (2000) argues, disfigurement is often used in the media to add to the drama and symbolise the character as evil, and this is what happens with Sandor Clagane, who as a child was burnt by his brother. In the beginning of the series, he is the main guard of King Joffrey, one of the main villains. Sandor is mostly regarded by other characters with fear due to his reputation as being a ruthless killer (“Sandor Clagane”, n.d.). Nonetheless, he often offers a helping hand to Sansa when she is being tormented by King Joffrey and later on, while on the run after escaping from his duties in the castle, he meets Arya Stark and becomes her protector and father figure.

When considering these two characters, it can be said that disability and facial disfigurement are not presented as being the definition of evil. As Ferreday (2015) argues, in *Game of Thrones*, characters are not portrayed as being completely good or completely evil, but stand somewhere in between – a concept she calls moral ambivalence. Furthermore, far from presenting disability and evil as being synonymous, Lambert (2015) argues that the “genuine monsters” (p. 32) in the show are portrayed as being attractive and “admired for their looks” (p. 32), such as Cersei and Joffrey. To an extent Jaime, as will be discussed in the next section, is also strikingly attractive and considered as a villain before he sustains his amputation.

### **3.2. Disability as punishment**

Fantasy stories typically portray disability as punishment for bad conduct and in *Game of Thrones* the body is oftentimes used as “the site of retribution” (Lambert, 2015, p. 22). Hence, to an extent it can be said that disability becomes the result of vengeance and a way for one person to exert power over another. He adds that several characters in the series have undergone some form of disfigurement and in most cases, following this mutilation there is a drastic change in character. Perhaps one of the most shocking events in the series was in fact when Jaime Lannister got his sword hand amputated in a scene which was presented in such a way so as to makes the audience experience a strong degree of shock.

From the first episode, the audience learns that he is in an incestuous relationship with his twin sister, Cersei, and is immediately regarded as a villain when he pushes Bran out of a window after having seen them being intimate. He mostly comes across as arrogant and pompous and not trustworthy once it is revealed that he had stabbed the previous king in the



back when his role was to protect the king, earning him the nickname Kingslayer (“Jaime Lannister”, n. d). In the second episode of the first season he refers to disabled people as “grotesque” (Benioff, Weiss & Van Patten, 2011, 00:08:08) and clearly expresses that in his “hierarchy, death comes before disability” (Lambert, 2015, p. 26).

The build up to the scene of Jaime’s amputation, together with the music used, make this scene a shocking one to watch<sup>5</sup>. This shock seems to have been made on purpose to mimic the shock that someone like Jaime, whose identity is ingrained within an ableist mind-set and revolves around his status as a knight and his ability to fight, might feel at the prospect of having become disabled. The writers of the show explain that they purposefully chose a mismatching contemporary rock song to follow such an act of violence to “really hammer home the shock of that moment” (Hibberd, 2013). While in this instance Jaime seems to have been punished for trying to bargain his way out of an unfavourable situation, on the larger scale of the story, it can be said that he is being punished primarily for pushing Bran out of the window. A multitude of other reasons can be thought of for why Jaime’s disability can be regarded as punishment, such as his incestuous relationship with his sister and the betrayal of the king he murdered. Whatever the reason for this punishment may be, what is worth noting from the fate imposed on Jaime is that with the loss of his dominant hand, and with it his status, the motion is set for him to become a more amiable character. As Lambert (2015) puts it, his disability “makes room for the flowering of an unexpected complexity” (p. 24).

Therefore, it can be said that Jaime’s disability led to a drastic change in character. In the seventh episode of the third season, he puts his life in danger to go back and save Brienne; in the final episode of season four he lets Tyrion escape from prison where he was awaiting execution; and in the last episode to be aired, that of the seventh season, he is seen as abandoning his sister Cersei, who has since become the embodiment of evil, to presumably join those fighting to save the human race from an impending attack from the army of the

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<sup>5</sup> The scene happens at the end of the third episode of season three. After being held captive for a long time, stripped of his wealth and his usual immaculate appearance, he seems to manage to use his family’s wealth to bribe one of his captors. After weeks of ill-treatment, his captor seems enthralled by his promises of gold and agrees to untie him and offers Jaime hot food. Just as he lets his guard down and walked towards what should have been the table where he negotiated his freedom, he is knocked down to his knees and while being held at knife point, mocked for trying to be clever and threatened to not use his father’s wealth as a bargaining chip again. As Jaime accepts these terms, his captor moves away, giving the impression that the worse was over. Only he comes back a second later and swiftly chops Jaime’s right hand off with one clean sweep. The scene blacks out into the credits with Jaime’s screams still being heard before upbeat rock music is heard.

dead<sup>6</sup>. In a way it can be argued that his disability has been used in such a way so as to give the character a way to evolve and grow. Hence, to a certain extent, Jaime's amputation is used as a *narrative prosthesis* in order to develop the character arc. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe narrative prosthesis as being the need that narratives have to rely on disability in order to develop the plot.

Arya Stark's temporary loss of sight as punishment for not obeying orders during her training at the temple of the Many-Faced God<sup>7</sup> (Massie & Mayer, 2014) can also be considered as a narrative prosthesis. Once again this reinforces the idea of disability as retribution for bad behaviour. During the sixth season she continues training while struggling with her blindness. During this time Arya becomes the victim of violence, an object of pity and isolated, thereby reinforcing even other stereotypes as described by Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987). Eventually, Arya proves herself enough to be given her sight back. This type of representation is congruous with Quinlan and Bates' (2009) argument that disabled people may become disempowered when shown disabled people on film who are given the ability to return to society's normative standards. In the eight episode of season six, Arya, who has decided to leave her training in order to go ahead with her plans of personal vendetta against all those who have wronged her family, faces the waif<sup>8</sup> in a battle for her life. It is during this battle that her fleeting experience with disability becomes her narrative prosthesis and is used as a way to progress the plot and as Nelson (1994) said, add to the drama. During this fight Arya tricks the waif into a darkened room, using the skills she gained while blinded to kill her enemy who had become disoriented in the dark.

When speaking of corporal punishment and mutilation, one cannot fail to mention Theon. In the first season he is depicted as a talented archer and as hypersexual. Lambert (2015) describes him as a cocky, entitled "alpha male" (p. 23-24). When he is taken captive, he is tortured and gradually dismantled as skin is removed from his fingers and he is eventually castrated. With this process, Lambert (2015) argues that Theon was not only stripped of his flesh, but also his sexuality and with it his identity. He also argues that it was only after this ordeal that Theon demonstrated self-reflection. Once again it seems that the disabling

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<sup>6</sup> Deceased humans who have been reanimated by an ancient magical humanoid race known as white walkers, in order to act as an army in an attempt to dominate Westeros ("White walkers", n. d).

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the fifth season, Arya is involved in rigorous training to become part of a group of assassins called the Faceless Men. At the end of the season she disobeys orders and takes it upon herself to use magical powers and skills learnt during her training to get personal revenge. The punishment bestowed upon her is temporary blindness.

<sup>8</sup> An assistant serving the group of assassins known as The Faceless Men ("Waif", n. d).

punishment imposed on a character is used as a way to progress the plot and provide him with an opportunity to redeem himself<sup>9</sup>. In fact later on in season five and season six, Theon tries to redeem himself with the Starks by helping Sansa escape her abusive husband.

### 3.3. Disability and violence

As argued in the previous section, in the world of *Game of Thrones*, violence is pervasive. As proposed by Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987), disabled people are stereotypically represented as being the victims of violence. Throughout the series there were instances when Tyrion's life was endangered, mostly due to other people's ill intentions towards him. What is worth mentioning is that, in these circumstances, instead of being the victim of violence, he uses his wit to turn the situation around to his advantage. As Donnelly (2016) explains, Tyrion uses his intelligence to survive and to overcome the stereotypes imposed on him by society. She argues that this intelligence is not bestowed upon him as a super-power to make up for his disability but is the result of a lot of reading and research from his part. In fact, he regards his intelligence and the need to read as other men regard their fighting skills. This can be seen when he is asked why he reads so much and he answers "my brother has a sword, and I have my mind, and a mind needs books like a sword needs a whetstone" (Benioff, Weiss & Van Patten, 2011, 00:27:29).

In the fifth episode of season one, when Tyrion was being held captive after being wrongly accused of Bran's attempted murder, the travelling party is attacked by the hill tribes. Tyrion manages to defend himself, save his captor's life and in the process killed his first man. Apart from not becoming the victim of violence, through using his wit, he manages to win for himself his freedom and when later on he encounters the same tribes he manages to convince them to protect him and becomes their leader (Benioff, Weiss & Minahan, 2011). Furthermore, in the ninth episode of season two during the battle of the Blackwater<sup>10</sup>, Tyrion surprised everyone by managing to destroy the enemy's naval army with the use of wildfire<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Theon had been taken from his family, the Greyjoys, to live as a hostage and ward of House Stark. Despite the conditions under which he ended up being raised by the Starks, he is treated fairly and given the same opportunities as all the other Stark children ("Theon Greyjoy", n. d.). In season two, however, in a desperate attempt to regain his father's respect, he seizes Winterfell, the castle of the Starks, and stages the murder of the two younger Stark boys, Bran and Rickon who end up being forced to flee their home. In the third season he is tricked and betrayed by his own men and ends up being held prisoner.

<sup>10</sup> A battle which took place in Blackwater bay when Stannis Baratheon (the late King Robert's brother) tried to seize the throne from King Joffrey after claims that the latter was born out of the incestuous relationship between Queen Cersei and her twin brother Jaime, making Stannis the legitimate heir to the throne ("Battle of the Blackwater", n. d.).

<sup>11</sup> Wildfire is a very volatile and flammable substance which explodes when ignited resulting in incandescent flames which cannot be extinguished with water ("Wildfire", n. d.).

He had spent a lot of time planning and researching the use of this weapon, thereby proving how he uses reading as a way to win battles (Benioff, Weiss & Marshall, 2012). As Donnelly (2016) argues, even his father does not deem him fit to manage anything else but the cisterns and drains of their castle. Tyrion, however, makes use of the knowledge he has regarding the sewer system and directs an army through a secret passage in order to attack the castle (Benioff, Weiss & Mylod, 2017), once again turning his situation from victim to victor.

### **3.4. Disability and asexuality**

Another disability stereotype represented in media is that of asexuality (Rubin & Strauss Watson, 1987). Massie and Mayer (2014) argue that a common perception is that disabled people are “sexually and emotionally immature” (p. 56) and that through Tyrion, this “taboo” (p. 56) is challenged. They argue that typically, in the realm of medieval fantasies, emphasis is made on living a life of overindulgence, violence and sexual promiscuity, particularly for men. This is seen in banquet scenes full of food, alcohol and women. They add that while usually these scenes exclude disabled people, the same cannot be said for *Game of Thrones*. Tyrion’s sexual nature is immediately instilled in his narrative as the first time the audience sees him, he is drinking while in the company of a prostitute in a brothel who describes him as “a drunken little lecher prone to all matter of perversions” (Benioff, Weiss & Van Patten, 2011, 00:31:19).

Nonetheless, as the series progresses the audience learns that in his youth Tyrion was victim of his family’s assumptions that he is not capable of finding a partner. Tyrion recalls how when he was sixteen he was with his brother when they met a girl who had just been raped. While his brother chased the rapers, Tyrion took care of the girl, Tysha, and they got drunk and married. Tysha was his first love and the first woman he was intimate with. He soon discovers that she was a prostitute and that his brother Jaime had orchestrated everything because he had thought that Tyrion needed help to get himself a woman. His father punished him for marrying her by paying her in silver coins to be gang raped in front of Tyrion’s eyes (Benioff, Weiss & Taylor, 2011, 00:39:09-00:41:28). Massie and Mayer (2014) explain that as a result of this incident, Tyrion accepts “the rhetoric that he, as a dwarf, is not capable of inspiring romantic love” (p. 57) and becomes sexually promiscuous as a way of taking agency over his identity and as a statement that his disability does not affect his masculinity.

Hovey (2015) also proposes that in a medieval context, much importance is given to “gallantry and courtesy” (p. 87) as a sign of chivalry, but Tyrion rebuffs these romantic ideals

as they reinforce normative embodiments. In fact, Hovey argues that *Game of Thrones*, teaches the audience to be critical of chivalry as it is a romantic illusion that justifies “hatred of unusual bodies” (p. 88). Hartinger (2012) adds that through this series, characters who in fiction are usually considered as “freaks and outcasts” (p. 164) such as dwarfs, are presented as having a sexual nature. Hovey (2015) argues that, while refuting chivalry and expressing his sexuality promiscuously with prostitutes, Tyrion still holds ethical values surrounding human emotions and as a result he manifests compassion, as discussed earlier with how he treated Sansa on their wedding night.

### **3.5. Disability as object of humour**

Historically people of small stature were considered as being freaks or objects of derision (Backstrom, 2012). Culturally, within a medieval setting such as that in *Game of Thrones*, they were typically seen as jesters and as the embodiment of “amusement and repulsion” (Massie & Mayer, 2014, p. 55). However, in *Game of Thrones*, the representation of disability through Tyrion, redefines the relationship between disability and humour. Peter Dinklage, the actor playing Tyrion, describes the character as having “a sense of humour even in the worst of times” (Lawrence, 2015, para. 2). The fact that Tyrion frequently passes jokes, sometimes even related to his disability, might have, what Albrecht (1999) describes as an emancipatory effect. Albrecht also explains that since Tyrion has a disability himself, his jokes can be considered “inside jokes” (p. 73) and contribute to a sense of bonding amongst disabled people.

To an extent his jokes can be considered as being *disability humour* since Reid, Stoughton and Smith (2006) describe it as being humour said by disabled people on disability. They propose that through disability humour, disability becomes just another part of the human condition and it offers a way for the audience to relate to the comedian. There are several comical conversations between Tyrion and his friend Bronn but one particular makes a direct reference to how he can take advantage of his short stature during a battle.

Bronn: “Stay low.”

Tyrion: “Stay low?”

Bronn: “If you’re lucky no one will notice you.”

Tyrion: “I was born lucky.” (Benioff, Weiss & Taylor, 2011, 00:43:20)

To an extent here Tyrion also takes a quip at how society does not notice disabled people, something which seems to go over non-disabled people’s heads, just as it did over Bronn’s.

With this type of humour, according to Reid, Stoughton and Smith (2006), Tyrion uses “self-deprecatory humor positively to dissolve and recreate disability” (p. 635) and in the process reverse the power dynamics so that from victim he becomes the executor of the joke. Hence, it can also be said that Tyrion defies yet another stereotype, that of being the victim of humour.

### **3.6. Disability as a pathetic burden**

Disabled characters are typically portrayed as being incapable of living a full life, as a burden on those around them and there to elicit pity out of the audience (Rubin & Strauss Watson, 1987). Despite a lifetime of prejudice and ill treatment stemming from his physical impairment, Tyrion has managed to hold certain strategically important positions, such as acting hand of the king<sup>12</sup>, master of coin<sup>13</sup> and hand of the queen<sup>14</sup> (“Tyrion Lannister”, n.d.). In a series where “anyone can die” (Lambert, 2015, p. 22), the fact that Tyrion has so far survived all adversity, certainly strays from the abovementioned stereotypes. Hence, it can be argued that while the society Tyrion finds himself in treats him in terms of these stereotypes, the audience is made to consider him in terms of his achievements.

The same cannot be said for Bran’s representation of disability. Despite Tyrion’s assistance in helping him regain some of his independence with the use of adapted equipment, Lambert explains how the discourse surrounding Bran’s condition is centred around what he will not be able to do and how he will not be able to achieve his dream of becoming a knight, thereby identifying him as one whose body does not work (Shakespeare, 1996). This reinforces Rubin and Strauss Watson’s (1987) stereotypes of pity, and of being a burden and incapable of living a full life.

### **3.7. The Supercrip**

Following Bran’s accident, apart from being portrayed as a burden, he is also given a magical power, what Lambert (2015) refers to as a “compensation card” (p. 27) and Donnelly (2016) as a “disability superpower” (para. 30). Apart from using his disability as a narrative prosthesis to progress the character’s involvement in the plot, by providing him with paranormal skills, it is implied that living life as a disabled person is not good enough unless you have a super power. When Bran uses his superpower, which gives him the ability to time

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<sup>12</sup>A very powerful appointed position, second only to the King, who acts as advisor, represents the King in his absence and has the authority to make decisions on his behalf (“Hand of the King”, n. d.).

<sup>13</sup>A member of the royal government responsible for the financial matters of the Crown (“Master of Coin”, n. d.).

<sup>14</sup>If the ruling monarch is a female, the position is called as such (“Hand of the King”, n. d.).

travel and the ability to see the past and the future, his eyes turn cloudy and he is not able to see. Norden (1994) argues that a common stereotype found in media is the “saintly sage” (p. 131). He explains that this character is usually old and disabled, most commonly blind, and acts “as a voice of reason and conscience in a chaotic world” (p. 131). Despite not being old himself, Bran receives training to perfect his supra-natural skills by the Three-Eyed Raven; a character portrayed by an old man. Bran is undergoing training to become the Three-Eyed Raven himself and act as the one offering wisdom when their world is in a chaotic state. Hence, considering that he has a disability and becomes blind when using wisdom gained from his powers, it can be said that he reinforces the saintly sage stereotype.

### **3.8. Disability as a prop**

With his super power, Bran also has the ability to control the minds of other living things. He first starts by controlling animals such as his direwolf<sup>15</sup> and ravens and then progresses to control the mind of a stable boy with an intellectual disability named Hodor. Lambert (2015) argues that to an extent, the way in which Bran uses Hodor to carry him around and how he takes control of his mind without any consent is tantamount to abuse. Lambert speaks of how Bran’s use of Hodor as a prop to make up for his disability, shows a hierarchy of power between physical disability and intellectual disability. When in the fifth episode of season six, Hodor’s backstory<sup>16</sup> is revealed, the level of abuse is highlighted further. Even more tragic is the fact that while the audience is being shown this heart wrenching backstory, Hodor is sacrificing his life in order to save Bran’s (Kosonen & Ylönen, 2017). Hodor’s sacrifice accentuates the hierarchy of disability as it seems to imply that the life of a person with intellectual disability is worth less than that of a person with a physical disability. Hence, the representation of Hodor is rather stereotypical. Portrayed as only able to repeat his name, he is mostly presented as the object of humour and as a prop to help Bran get around.

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<sup>15</sup>A mythical, large and intelligent type of wolf (“Direwolves”, n. d.).

<sup>16</sup> Bran’s magical powers make him able to time travel while in a trans-like state. During one of his time travelling episodes, driven by his curiosity to learn more about his family’s past, he stays too long in his trans-like state making himself vulnerable to an attack by the army of the dead. Hodor and more of Bran’s friends try to escort him out of harm’s way and in the process the past and present become magically entangled. Tragically, it transpires that Hodor’s intellectual disability was caused by Bran’s interference with time travel.

## 4. Conclusion

With the extensive number of disabled characters that have been discussed, and those who had to be left out due to lack of space, it seems reasonable to conclude that *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy story which presents a vast array of disability experiences (Lambert, 2015). According to Massie and Mayer (2014), by presenting an ample variety of disabilities, this narrative provides the audience with more insight into the “multifaceted nature of disability” (p. 52). They argue that with each variant of disability, the audience is made to appreciate the various struggles disabled people may be faced with, such as being subjected to lifetime of ableist attitudes for those born with a congenital disability, to the sudden identity challenges experienced when faced with an acquired disability. They also add that what makes this show so captivating is that despite being a fantasy, the fact that none of the characters’ fate is safe, makes the world of *Game of Thrones* “as arbitrary and dangerous as our own” (p. 52). Subsequently, the barrier used to separate the non-disabled from the disabled, is shattered as non-disabled viewers start appreciating the “mortality and vulnerability” (p. 59) of being human as they realise that disability can happen to anyone. By doing so, according to Massie and Mayer, this narrative starts “dismantling the clichés of disability” (p. 58).

Tyrion, who defies all the major stereotypes with which disability is typically portrayed in media, can be considered as what Donaldson (1981) has described as a positive role model for disabled people. Having Peter Dinklage, who, like the character in the series, has achondroplasia (Gold & Borges, n.d.), makes Tyrion the only disabled character in the show to be played by a disabled actor. Shakespeare (1999) argued in favour of having disabled actors playing disabled characters as it provides a more accurate representation of the disability experience. Harnett (2000) also explains that by having disabled actors play disabled characters, it is ensured that disabled people speak for themselves and not through the voice of non-disabled authors or directors.

Tyrion is presented as not being a victim despite a lifetime of prejudice. He succeeds in his endeavours using solely his wits and humour without being gifted with any special powers and is sexual while still courteous. In a world set in the past, Tyrion advocates a contemporary social model approach to disability and offers an affirmative representation to disability by presenting a “non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities” (Swain & French, 2000, p. 569). As a disabled actor himself, Peter Dinklage speaks positively of what playing the character Tyrion has done to the



representation of disabled people within Hollywood. He said that not only has *Game of Thrones* humanised dwarves in fantasy fiction, but his success meant that he has redefined the definition of what it means to be a leading man and that “Hollywood is finally opening the door wider to more realistic portrayals of who people are” (Lawrence, 2015, para. 4).

Quite a number of characters become disabled as a form of punishment for their behaviour, such as Jaime, Arya and Theon. Whilst this may reinforce a negative representation of disability, the context of the show has to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, while undoubtedly Jaime and Theon’s disfigurements can be considered as a narrative prosthesis, it can also be argued that, with their disability the characters evolve. They turn from being non-disabled and evil to being disabled and more humane, thereby challenging the stereotype that disability and deformity are tantamount to villainy, and reinforcing the stereotype that the experience of disability can make someone a better person. Perhaps the worse representation of disability in this series is through Bran Stark. Much of the discourse surrounding Bran’s disability remains ingrained in ableistic ideals as continuous reference is made to his incapacities (Lambert, 2015). Moreover, his acquisition of a superpower reinforces the supercrip stereotype, while his blatant abuse of Hodor reinforces the inequalities within the hierarchy of disabilities.

Therefore, as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) argue, it would be simplistic to categorise the representation of disability in *Game of Thrones* as being either positive or negative. Just as the experience of disability in real life comes with its complexity, with each disabled character in *Game of Thrones*, there are a multitude of factors to consider. However, despite the reinforcement of certain negative stereotypes, this series still provides the audience with non-typical heroes who challenge normative standards. By being portrayed as morally ambivalent these heroes are made more human and more relatable. Most importantly, *Game of Thrones* raises awareness of the disability experience as it portrays disabled characters as “complex people with strengths and weaknesses” (Ellis, 2014, para. 30).

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