Portrayals of the Differently-Abled

“Never judge a book by its cover,” is a phrase we have all heard from an adult in our lives: a lesson about how we perceive others without taking the time to peel back the layers; one that helps us see the worth of a person, instead of just what we see on the surface. This warning isn’t unusual to us, and yet, people make that mistake over and over again, quick to write off a person as what people believe them to be without actually knowing them. No one experiences the other side of this habit more than those that are different. While someone could face a temporary hardship like being made fun of for an outfit or for something they’ve said, neurodivergent people often make choices that neurotypical people find odd and they have to face the critical view society has shaped for those who are “different.” People preach that others should strive to be less judgemental of one another, and yet many continue to do so daily. The main character in the short story, “Greatness Strikes Where it Pleases,” by Lars Gustaffson and the character Lennie in the novel, Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck are both neurodivergent people who have very different lives. Both authors are using these characters to show that people shouldn’t be so quick to judge those they don’t understand. This is supported by the authors’ uses of theme, tragic flaw, and point of view, even though they use them in different ways to get their point across.

One of the most critical parts of both stories is the comfort each of the main characters find. At night while they sleep on the river bank, Lennie recites their dreams: “But not us! Because I got you and you got me…An’ live off the fatta tha lan…An’ have rabbits” (Steinbeck 15-16). Both Lennie and George find solace in each other when talking about their dreams to buy land and live together in the future. Their friendship is complex when it comes to their roles: George is Lennie’s caretaker, but it seems that they are also satisfied with balancing each other
out and living their lives with a companion. George may get frustrated with Lennie at times, but no matter their arguments, he sees him for the good natured person Lennie truly is and isn’t as quick to judge him as the other characters. Similarly in “Greatness Strikes Where it Pleases,” we see the distance between our main character and the others in the story. This is not the case when it comes to nature, as he explains that “mushrooms were better. They didn’t care about having names…He felt a kinship, a friendship between himself and these cool objects” (Gustafsson 92-93). Not only are mushrooms, plants, and trees fascinating to him by the way they grow and live, but they also don’t put expectations on him like his family, school, and institution did. The companionship that the boy has with nature and Lennie with George is something that the other characters in both pieces don’t see, or don’t have themselves. And yet these other characters are the first to condemn them for being abnormal.

But these characters are not without flaws. When Lennie killed the puppy, he was filled with remorse for not listening as he finally understands “you wasn’t big enough… They tol’ me you wasn’t. I [didn’t] know you’d get killed so easy” (Steinbeck 85). This was not the first, nor the last time that Lennie forgot the things that George warned him about, as well as not having self control over his own strength until it was too late. This repeated behavior would trigger severe negative consequences like having to run and hide in Weed, and Lennie’s death. No matter if he had innocent intentions or just forgot his past mistakes, he is still held accountable for his actions. Unlike Steinbeck, Gustafsson took a different approach to who had shortcomings in his story. The main character, although less perceptive of people than concerned with his natural surroundings, recognized his caretakers’ ambivalent feelings about the patients in the institution. He thought about how “they [women aides] were so divided between disgust and maternity, or locked into a maternity which was disgust at the same time” (Gustafsson 99). While
these women may believe the people in the home are unaware and wouldn’t notice their true feelings about them, it is obvious that the boy does, he just doesn’t care enough to prove his worth to them. He observed that the aides view him and his fellow patients as incapable and those who should be pitied, but secretly judge him and the other mentally challenged people in the home for being the way they are. The author doesn’t want the audience to view the main character as someone who is disabled and flawed, while the “normal” people of society are the ones who are lucky. His belief is that it wasn’t the boy who had a defect in his inability to communicate, but theirs for not being able to see him and others who are neurodivergent as they truly are: just different people.

The perspective used by the authors is also important in these two texts. In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck narrates from a more objective point of view, describing scenes from an outside presence. This lack of knowledge of any of the characters’ thoughts gives the reader the chance to infer and see them as they would see people in real life, and to view every interaction between characters even if it is private. This only changes once to give us an opportunity to see Lennie’s thoughts as he hallucinates after he killed Curley’s wife; his guilt is obvious as he reasons, “I tried, Aunt Clara, ma’am. I couldn’t help it…I’ll live there [a cave] so I won’t be no more trouble to George” (Steinbeck 100). We get a glimpse of the perspective of Lennie, and while his actions throughout the book show his good-naturedness, it is only then that the reader sees his true thoughts. Lennie's internal struggle with feeling like a burden, trying to do the right thing but failing, is something that any and all can feel. He may not be the same as everyone else, but he has feelings and he has enough awareness to know when he has made a mistake. While Steinbeck used this method, Gustafsson honed in on the main character only. By the end of the story, the main character has grown from a boy to a man and is content in his life, as the narrator
explains that “he sat in his chair…in the patch of the sun. He was as slow as the galaxy and as mysterious” (Gustafsson 103). For the reader to be able to see inside his head, is to teach us that maybe what people always assumed was happening in the minds of those who are labeled as neurodivergent, is not what people expected all. Just like Lennie, he has feelings, thoughts, and ideas; he just doesn’t care to share them or prove himself to others in the way they want him to. The way the short story was written not only gives us insight on what the man is thinking, but it also humanizes him with the common feelings that we have all experienced when so many look at him as if he were no better than an object or animal, something inferior to them.

Which begs the question: what is the “correct” way to live life? While Lennie didn’t choose his fate in the end of the novel, he had dreams, aspirations, and happiness. The protagonist of “Greatness Strikes Where it Pleases,” had a similar outlook on life where he didn't choose the way he was made, but found peace in it. The authors wrote these in order for us to be more perceptive of those around us, whether or not they are different. In reality, people have no idea what others are feeling or experiencing, and that's with or without being able to communicate verbally. There were different ways of showing why ‘normal’ people shouldn’t just go off of assumptions and stereotypes that cloud their judgment when encountering differently-abled people. However, they both were determined to point out why these harmful behaviors, our flaws, need to be changed.
Works Cited
