

**Guys and Dolls:
Constructing Disabled Teens on Television**

BY

JESS TOURTELLOTTE
B.A., The Evergreen State College, 2009

THESIS

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Defense Committee:

Carrie Sandahl, Chair and Advisor
Carol Gill
Sarah Parker Harris

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SUMMARY

A critical theory approach was used in this paper to explore mass media's shift in portraying characters with disabilities in teen television. This work focuses on three popular contemporary American teen television dramas and a relatively recent short Australian film to discuss their representations of disability. In the past, mass media has often represented characters with disabilities as tragic victims, super crips, powerless, asexual or sexually wayward, or villainous. This thesis works to demonstrate a gradual shift occurring in the representation of disability in the entertainment industry. For the last eight years, teen television in particular has been disrupting the typical stereotypes of people with disabilities. These new portrayals depict young adult disabled characters as culturally and socially empowered, independent and sexually aware. This thesis also seeks to bring adolescents with disabilities into the forefront of humanities based research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the past eight years mass media has made a notable effort to expand disability's presence in teen television. Popular shows directed toward teen audiences such as *Glee* (2009-Present), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present) have introduced a wide range of characters with disabilities on television. Other shows like *Switched at Birth* (2011-2013) show a rare dedication to provide a realistic representation of people who are Deaf and their culture. Given the growing interest of disability found in teen television dramas this thesis works to explore and discuss the ways disabled young adults are represented on teen television. It also seeks to demonstrate how young characters with disabilities on TV are disrupting and complicating familiar stereotypes critiqued in disability studies. To accomplish the task of understanding the new representations presented about disability in teen dramas, I turn to the following research questions, where are youth with disabilities in mass media? How are these youth with disabilities being represented? How do disabled youth see themselves? Based on my analysis of three recent popular teen television shows: *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *Pretty Little Liars*, along with an international short film, *Yolk* (2007); I argue that while stereotypes of people with disabilities are still being embraced by the entertainment industry, recent teen programs and film featuring youth with disabilities are providing an alternate perception about being disabled.

A. Literature Review

To contextualize the significance of this project I draw from the work done by disability studies scholars and their analysis of the themes presented about disability in popular mass media. Furthermore, I look to youth studies to bring attention to the current gap in research undertaken about youth with disabilities mentioned by other scholars and researchers. In

addition, I incorporate girl studies in this work to account for the meaning of girl culture and how disabled young women are finding space to become active participants within this culture cultivated by young women.

1. **Disability Studies**

Before Disability Studies emerged less than twenty years ago as an academic discipline (Simon 1) many disability scholars and researchers were already bringing awareness to important issues affecting the disability community. Among these important issues were conversations about the ways in which people with disabilities were being represented in mass media. In historian Paul Longmore's essay, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People Television and Motion Pictures" featured in his book *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (2003), he points to the entertainment industry's use of the stereotype of the "maladjusted disabled person" and "supercrip" to depict characters with disabilities in mass media during the late 1980's and early 1990's (138). In his essay Longmore defines the "maladjusted disabled person" as a character that engages in self-pitying behavior based on their having a disability. Stretching his definition of the "maladjusted disabled person" further, Longmore states, "Typically disabled characters lack insight about themselves and other people, and require emotional education, usually by a nondisabled character" (138). The stereotype of the "maladjusted disabled person" follows particular themes often associated with people who are disabled such as being weak and miserable. It also portrays people with disabilities as unable to "cope" with their disability without support from a nondisabled person. Ultimately the nondisabled person is believed to have a wiser perspective about the disabled person's life, compared to the disabled person who is living with his or her disability. This belief raises awareness to another theme aligned with the "maladjusted disabled person", that is, a person

with a disability is unaware of the positive nature of having a disability. In short, people with disabilities are portrayed as negative-thinkers and are emotionally dependent.

On the opposite end of the stereotype spectrum of the “maladjusted disabled person” is the idea of the “supercrip”. While the “supercrip” stereotype seemingly places a positive spin to having a disability, it is equally dehumanizing to people with disabilities. Beliefs attached to the “supercrip” stereotype position people with disabilities as “inspirational”. Additionally, the notion of the “supercrip” unintentionally place people with disabilities onto a high pedestal that people without disabilities expect everyone living with a disability to rise to. According to Paul Longmore, the “supercrip” portrays people with disabilities as being able to do “impossible” acts and or having an exceptionally positive attitude about having a disability (140). A positive attitude toward disability, however, does not always result in a person with a disability accepting his or her disability. In fact, often times a “supercrip” seeks to cure themselves of their disability through hard work and dedication. These misconstrued images of the “maladjusted disabled person” and “supercrip” are what the majority of the public, including people with disabilities and disabled youth are exposed to in mainstream media. Therefore, conversations and analysis regarding how people with disabilities are portrayed in popular mass media continue to be an important and relevant topic of discussion today.

Thinking alongside Longmore, scholar Alison Hartnett discusses the use of the “supercrip” and its stereotyping of people with disabilities in mass media. Interestingly Hartnett speaks to how the stereotype of the “supercrip” is used as an inspirational tool to teach the audience. She writes that the role of the “supercrip” is “a metaphor for the more general human struggle to overcome life’s obstacles” (22). Meaning that if a person can overcome their disability then nondisabled people can accomplish anything. Furthermore, on the surface, the

idea of the “supercrip” strengthens and empowers people with disabilities. The stereotype tells people with disabilities that they are amazing because they are accomplishing tasks despite their “limitation(s)”. Being a “supercrip” also creates a sense of security and belonging for people with disabilities who are eager to gain respect and notice from the nondisabled community. In response, nondisabled people are mesmerized when disabled people accomplish “impossible” tasks or achieve “miracles”. In reality, the underlying message of the “supercrip” tells people with disabilities that they are not good enough, which pushes disabled people to become better or even heroic.

While nondisabled individuals express positive feelings toward disabled people, they are also prone toward feelings of pity. Pity is often associated with the stereotype of the “tragic victim”. In addition to pity, depression, isolation and immobility are other themes often associated with the portrayal of the “tragic victim” in mass media. Similar to the “maladjusted disabled person” the “tragic victim” paints a dark portrait of what living with a disability is like. The stereotype of the “tragic victim” in particular, plays on nondisabled society’s worst fears about disability. In many portrayals of the “tragic victim”, especially for people who have acquired a disability, life comes to an abrupt halt, with little opportunity to advance. More definitively, disability is a state that people cannot escape, they become literal victims of the circumstances that have taken over their body (Stremain, “The personal tragedy theory of disability, Mike Oliver, and the social model”, Living Archives on Eugenics Blog).

Following her discussion of the “supercrip” Harnett continues her observation of how people with disabilities are projected in popular entertainment. She turns to another popular representation of people with disabilities, the villain. In her article, Harnett speaks to how disabled characters are subjected to play villainous roles. Harnett explains, “The immorality of

the villain is linked with his or her physical deformity as a dramatic technique” (21). Common themes attached to the characterization of a villain with a disability include aggression, anger, and most importantly vengeance. The stereotype of the villain draws the conclusion that people with disabilities hate being disabled and that having a disability changes a person for the worst. The film, *The Dark Knight* (2008), provides a perfect example of showing the shedding of humanity that can occur for a character who has a physical disfigurement. In the film the character of the Joker, who has a facial disfigurement, aspires to make the city of Gotham as deceitful and murderous as he is. Toward the end of the film, the Joker pits a ship of civilians against a ship filled with convicted felons. In this scene he has provided each boat with a detonator to the bomb located on the opposite ship. The only way to live is for one of the ships to blow up the other one before time on the clock runs out. In an earlier scene in the movie the Joker explains how he was just a common man until he received his disfigurement by another’s hands. Then in a separate scene he states that his facial disfigurement was self-inflicted to please his former wife who had a similar facial disfigurement after being attacked. In the end, when his wife realized what he had done, she left him. While the Joker’s stories of his facial disfigurement conflict, the message is the same. He became not simply a different man, but a physical embodiment of evil, due to his facial disfigurement.

The stereotype of the villainous disabled character makes for a popular storyline in mass media because it creates a plot that makes sense to people without disabilities. Anger is believed to be a rational feeling for someone to have when they’re disabled because being disabled is a cruel and unforgivable fate. Or is it?

Not everyone with a disability feels that being disabled is a tragic or unjust fate. In fact many people in the disability community are proud of their disability and who they are as people

with disabilities. Not only are they proud, at the same time, they push back against the negative beliefs people and mass media have about disability. Disability studies scholars Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer articulate this point of view in their article “Disability Culture: Assimilation or Inclusion” (2001). Barnes and Mercer claim, “disability culture rejects the notion of impairment-difference as a symbol of shame or self-pity and instead stresses solidarity and positive self-identification” (522). Disability culture gives a separate, more relatable outlet for people with disabilities to use. It is a culture where people with disabilities can participate and feel included.

Susan J. Peters articulates in the *Encyclopedia of Disability* (2005), “notions of disability culture emphasize a way of living and a positive identification with being disabled” (Peters 413-21). In “We Are Who We Are: So Who Are We? Musings on the definition of disability culture” (1996), disability studies activist Stephen Brown searches for an understanding of culture. One definition being, a person is a part of a culture when they believe they are. (Brown, “We Are Who We Are: So Who Are We? Musings on the definition of disability culture”, Independent Living Institute). It is a simple, yet brilliant definition of culture. While some scholars like Susan Wendell question whether the disability community actually has their own culture, it seems Stephen Brown’s definition has a strong foundation in the disability community. The mere belief in the existence of disability culture has created the foundation that has brought many people with disabilities together.

2. **Youth Studies**

Research on adolescents with disabilities has rarely been accounted for in disability studies. This is a significant point that disability scholar Mark Priestley makes in his book, *Disability: Life Course Approach* (2003). Priestley reflects, “Interestingly, there is little reference to youth cultures or consumption within disability studies, although the topic of leisure

has attracted attention in therapeutic literature” (91). Priestley’s quote also teaches that what little research does account for disabled youth fails to exist within humanities-based research. It is imperative that studies focused on youth with disabilities occur outside of therapeutic research in order to capture the full range of their experiences. Similar to Priestley, medical anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce regards how youth with disabilities are not only rarely accounted for in research, but that existing dialogue and research is limited, stating,

It is easier to list what is not known about disabled young people, than what is.

With several notable exceptions, there has been virtually no research on disabled young people as a distinct group in developing countries and what exists on young people with disabilities in the developed world focuses on them largely in the context of formal education and transition to work programmes (14).

Based on Priestley and Groce’s research youth with disabilities have been virtually ignored by societies. This problematic occurrence most likely stems from the inability for nondisabled people to link the notion of disability and youth together. Educator Bill Hughes believes, “Disability and youth are in profound tension” (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 12). His perspective originates from the beliefs that people have about youth and disability. As a whole most individuals see youth as beautiful and active—with a wide-open road ahead. On the other hand, it is believed, Hughes notes, “Disability is a signifier of ugliness, tragedy, asexuality, invalidity and frailty” (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 12). Another factor creating tension between nondisabled and disabled youth is the subject of access. Nondisabled youth can access social/community venues, be part of the consumerist market, and join recreational activities, as well as compete in the job market with ease. The ability to maneuver through one or more of these activities is a key ingredient to become a productive youth in American society. Unlike

nondisabled youth, youth with disabilities are not afforded these same opportunities. Disabled youth are often ostracized from their peers and the activities that are considered an essential part of growing up and being active agents in youth culture (Priestley 91-92). Unfortunately few youth with disabilities are given a chance to play on a sports team or be hired for a job because disabled people are considered a physical and/or financial burden (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 11). Without money from a job many disabled youth cannot contribute to the consumerist market. Not to mention many of the social and community venues that youth frequent usually require them to spend money. Even if money isn't an issue, environmental barriers make it physically impossible to visit or enter a popular hangout. Therefore, youth and disability are believed to be incompatible (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 12). Both Priestley and Groce's research regarding the lack of research conducted on disabled youth strengthen the importance behind the examination of youth with disabilities in this work. In addition Hughes, Russell, and Paterson's work points to an interesting question of whether the ideas of youth and disability are unable to converge. The focus on disabled youth in this thesis will also include a discussion of girl culture and where young women with disabilities fit in.

3. **Girl Studies**

One of the key components that exist within girl studies is girl culture. Educator Catherine Driscoll explains that the concept of girl culture emerged in the twentieth century. She believes that the purpose for the development of girl culture was, "for understanding the relations between gender, sexes, and ages, and between individuals, groups, and the production and reproduction of culture" (Driscoll 5). In her book, *Odd Girl Out* (2002), educator Rachel Simmons focuses on the dynamics that create power relationships between young women within girl culture. Among some of the more well-known discussions surrounding these relationships

like cliques, queen bees, and bullying, Simmons touches on less-known and discreet aspects that occur inside girl culture. *Odd Girl Out* (2002) pinpoints the most important theme that develops in relationships between young women in girl culture, aggression. In her work Simmons identifies three categories of aggression used by young women, *indirect aggression*, *social aggression*, and *relational aggression*. Each form of aggression plays a distinct role, with a distinct purpose for young women. Therefore, indirect aggression, social aggression, and relational aggression are critical tools that young women use to become a key player inside the world of girl culture.

B. **My Contribution**

This thesis works to lessen gap of research conducted on youth with disabilities, especially in humanities-based research. Furthermore the inclusion of youth in this work provides a new focus to disability studies' ongoing critique of how disability is being represented in popular mass media. At the same time the focus of disabled characters on *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights* and *Pretty Little Liars* demonstrate the ways youth with disabilities are participating in youth culture through recreational activities, shopping, and traveling. In addition this thesis also includes research on how young women with disabilities are participating in normative girl culture on television.

C. **Methodology**

In this thesis I use a critical disability lens to examine how youth with disabilities are portrayed on television programs meant to engage adolescent audiences. For my analysis I chose three recent teen television shows: *Glee* (2009-Present), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present) and an international short film, *Yolk*, (2007) to account for current representations being presented about disability today. *Glee* (2009-Present), *Friday Night Lights*

(2006-2011), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present), and *Yolk* (2007), in particular, engage and promote a wide range of ideas about disability. The stereotypes I focus on in these shows are the “maladjusted disabled person”, “supercrip”, “tragic victim”, “asexual”, “hypersexual”, and “villain”. I chose these stereotypes because I watched them being presented in these shows in different contexts. They are also the most common stereotypes discussed in disability studies. Each character in *Glee* (2009-Present), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present), and *Yolk* (2007) either reinforces or challenges and disrupts familiar stereotypes of disability seen in mass media. *Glee*’s Artie is shown as an active member of glee club; at the same time, however, he lacks the disability community perspective about having a disability and embraces themes found in the “maladjusted disabled person”. Similarly the character of Sean in *Glee* struggles with his acquired spinal cord injury and is portrayed as the ultimate “tragic victim”. The character of Becky Jackson who is played by a young woman with Down syndrome is a refreshing role to see in an industry where physical disability, disfigurement and mental health disabilities are more commonly represented in Hollywood. Yet Becky Jackson is positioned as both “asexual” and “hypersexual” throughout the seasons of *Glee*. Taking a different direction than *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights*’ Jason Street disrupts mass media’s usual representation of disability by resisting the lure of the “supercrip” stereotype and instead embraces the acceptance found in disability community and culture. Similar to *Friday Night Lights*, *Pretty Little Liars*’ character Jenna Cavanaugh complicates the stereotype of the “villain” in disability studies. Finally, where the character of Becky Jackson fails to provide a more enlightened understanding about people who have intellectual disabilities and sexuality in *Glee*, the character of Lena in the short film *Yolk* succeeds. The analysis of how young characters with disabilities are responding to stereotypes of disability presented by mass media in this work will

give a strong understanding of how the representation of disability in the entertainment industry is currently evolving.

D. **Chapter Review**

In the first chapter titled “Mixed Messages of Disability in *Glee*”, I discuss and analyze how *Glee* attempts to provide a deeper understanding of disability by incorporating storylines featuring characters with disabilities. Despite *Glee*’s attempt to create a place for disability in mass media, the effort is meaningless, due to the show’s reliance of popular stereotypes to represent disability. Following the first chapter, the second chapter called “New Direction in Representation” explores new and more accurate representations of disability in television and film. The first section of the chapter focuses on the TV drama *Friday Night Lights*, which follows the story of a young man with a newly acquired spinal cord injury. In similar fashion, the second section of this chapter explores the ways in which the character of a young woman who is blind complicates a familiar stereotype of disability in the show, *Pretty Little Liars*. This section of the chapter also provides a twist to the discussion of girl culture as well as the representation of disability. Lastly, the third section of the second chapter focuses on the Australian short film, *Yolk*, which challenges the stereotype that young people with disabilities, particularly young people who have intellectual disabilities, are “asexual”. I begin my analysis of mass media’s current representation of disability in teen television by examining the popular teen musical television drama, *Glee*.

II. MIXED MESSAGES OF DISABILITY IN *GLEE*

In 2009 Fox broadcast an edgy teenage musical comedy television show *Glee*. Since its airdate *Glee* has gained enormous popularity (Collins, 2011). It is a television show that has proven that creators Ryan Murphy, Bad Falchuck and Ian Brennan are not afraid to take risks. Several episodes in *Glee* bring forth difficult and underrepresented topics to network television such as hate crimes, teen pregnancy, cross-dressing, eating disorders and transgender identification. Going hand in hand with risk-taking, *Glee*'s characters and storylines have also been viewed as controversial. In the third season's episode, "First Time" (2011), creators of *Glee* Murphy, Falchuck, and Brennan brought sex to the forefront of the show. In the midst of the episode couple Rachel and Finn and couple Kurt and Blaine lose their virginity to one another. While "First Time" shook viewer's moral standards by alluding to Kurt and Blaine's sexual exploration and commitment to one another, a different episode titled "Wheels" (2009) captured the attention of a social movement. Since *Glee*'s premiere the disability community in particular has been a keen and aware observer of the portrayals and dialogue *Glee* presents about disability. News articles demonstrate how the disability community has taken notice of *Glee*'s depiction of disability ("Glee' Wheelchair episode hits bump with disabled" 2009). In many ways *Glee* has used a bold and outside-of-box formula for generating a television show geared toward capturing the adolescent population's experiences. Unfortunately, *Glee*'s attempt at unearthing the experiences of youth with disabilities is stale, often bordering on the edge of humiliating. In fact, the portrayal of disability in *Glee* is sadly disempowering.

A. **Social Exclusion: Artie, the Lone Ranger**

Youth with disabilities often experience isolation and/or social separation from their nondisabled peers in school. This separation becomes even more defined when disabled youth are involved in recreational activities. Such social isolation and exclusion can be seen in *Glee*'s episode "Wheels" In the beginning of "Wheels" glee club instructor, Mr. Schuester, reveals to the glee club that the school is unable to afford an accessible bus to transport the group to sectionals. Immediately, members of the group declare the unfairness of the situation. When Mr. Schuster proposes that the glee club set up a bake sale to raise funds to pay for an accessible bus, however, glee club members begin to retract their declarations of injustice. Fellow glee club member Mercedes suggests, "Can't Artie's Dad just take him?" Upon hearing Mercedes's question Mr. Schuester reprimands the glee club for their insensitivity, asking, "Are you a team?" Club member Quinn, answers, "Of course, but Artie understands. Don't you Artie?" The glee club's change of heart socially excludes him from being with the rest of the members. When the other glee club members leave Mr. Schuster apologizes for the fellow glee club members' reactions. Artie declares, "It's okay. I'm used to it." Artie's statement resonates with many people in the disability community who have been pushed aside, forgotten, and whose feelings have been deemed inconsequential. This "get used to it" mentality derives from American society's lack of knowledge and insight regarding the reality of living with a disability.

The United States is a society driven by the mentality that men and women must "pull themselves up by their bootstraps". Men and women in the US must be individualistic in nature, regardless of ability (Esping-Anderson 75). The glee club's recommendation for traveling to sectionals reinforces this highly regarded ideology, as transportation quickly becomes Artie's "problem", instead of a communal effort of figuring out how to attend the competition as a

whole. This scene also demonstrates Artie's awareness of his place or lack thereof in glee club. In their article "Nothing to be had 'off the peg': consumption, identity, and the immobilization of disabled young people" (2005) educator Bill Hughes and researchers Rachel Russell and Kevin Paterson bring to light the feelings Artie voices to Mr. Schuester. "Young disabled people seem to be very aware of the identity dynamics that reinforce their exclusion" (7). Hughes, Russell and Paterson continue, "Young disabled people want to participate in mainstream leisure activities" (8). Artie's willingness to accept his fellow glee club members' suggestion to drive separately to sectionals also reinforces the understanding that people with disabilities are used to finding an alternative. Therefore such separation of young people with disabilities from their nondisabled peers is not understood as a means of further discrimination, but rather the natural order of how people with disabilities live their lives. At the same time it becomes socially acceptable for nondisabled individuals to wave off matters like inaccessibility because it does not affect them.

Another occurrence of social exclusion for youth with disabilities happens when disabled youth seek to build relationships and bonds with nondisabled youth. Romantic connections, in particular, can be difficult to develop. One theory that accounts for the difficulty disabled youth face when trying to form romantic relationships is the lack of education that young adults with disabilities receive about partnerships, the body, sex, STDs and parenthood. Feminist scholar Barbara Waxman Fiduccia states, "Even into adulthood, disabled people don't have the facts" (171). Fiduccia's comment raises awareness of the lack of knowledge people with disabilities have about sex. Thus, the gross under-education of students with disabilities on the subject of sexual education leaves little room for disabled youth to know how to navigate through romantic relationships or even how to approach and share their feelings of desire. A strong example of a

young person with a disability who is unsure of how to express their romantic interest can be found in the following scene with the character of Artie Abrams.

In the episode, “Wheels,” (2009) Artie declares, “I want to be very clear. I still have the use of my penis,” to his love interest Tina. Artie’s declaration was most likely used as a method to generate a humorous take to Artie’s line. As a viewer, however, I experienced confusion hearing Artie’s statement, because Artie’s line seemed to come out of nowhere. The conversation between Artie and Tina had not been leading up to the mention of Artie’s sexual “capabilities”. Furthermore, as a disability advocate, I found Artie’s line to be both embarrassing and disheartening. While the underlying message behind Artie’s statement is undeniably important, his line is poorly delivered. His proclamation is meant to educate Tina and the audience, letting them know, that despite his spinal cord injury Artie can be physically intimate. The silence, which follows Artie’s comment, however, affirms its slightly inappropriate nature, as his crush, Tina, leaves the auditorium lost for words. Artie’s intention to reveal his ‘normalcy’ to Tina unintentionally backfires. His shotgun approach to express his sexual ability strengthens the idea offered by Barbara Waxman Fiduccia. Fiduccia believes that sexuality in connection to disability continues to be demonstrated as a means of “assisting the damaged male to regain his potency” (168). Though Artie’s declaration is a well-meaning effort to show that he can perform the same as nondisabled guys during intimate situations, the way he broaches the topic strengthens Fiduccia’s viewpoint that the ability to have sex becomes a crucial factor for men with disabilities in determining their worth. Despite this negative depiction of Artie, there is another scene in “Wheels” that demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of disability and complexities that disabled youth experience when building relationships with the nondisabled youth.

B. **Glimmers in *Glee***

The most realistic and heartfelt scene in “Wheels” occurs when Artie experiences loss after finding out the girl he likes, Tina, does not stutter. Toward the end of the episode, Tina reveals she has been pretending to have a speech impediment as a way to avoid being called on by her teachers and noticed by her peers. Since joining glee club, Tina realizes she does not want to continue her self-isolation. She elaborates her feelings to Artie. Tina explains how her self-isolation means missing out on a multitude of opportunities, especially social interactions, due to her ‘difference’. “I don’t want to push people away anymore. You understand what that’s like, don’t you?” Inevitably Tina’s confession and her unhindered speech leave Artie feeling betrayed and alone. He gives a disappointed reply, “No, I don’t. I’d never try to push people away, because being in a chair kind of does that for you. I thought we had something really important in common.” Tina tries to rectify her mistake, “Wait Artie, I’m sorry”. Artie, however, has zero tolerance for Tina’s charade. “I am too. I’m sorry now you get to be normal and I’m going to be stuck in this chair the rest of my life and that’s not something I can fake.” The sense of loss and betrayal Artie feels when he finds out Tina is faking a speech impediment is palpable.

Unlike Artie, Tina has the ability to walk away from participating or experiencing disability. Despite her connection and experience with disability, Tina struggles to gain an inside perspective of what it means to have a disability. Tina’s struggle is a powerful point that disability studies scholar Carol Gill outlines in her essay, “Questioning Continuum”. She elaborates,

That stiff smile, that condescending pat, that flight of stairs, that slick elevator devoid of braille signs, that loneliness on prom night, the aching to just live our lives without having to argue for equality—unfortunately, they are ours (Gill 47).

While Tina fails to recognize where Artie is coming from and his experience with disability, other characters in *Glee* possess a deeper understanding of disability.

In a separate story line in the episode of “Wheels”, glee club instructor Will Schuester expresses to principal Figgins a need for additional ramps to be built for the school. Cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester scoffs at Will’s idea. Will then recommends that Sue include a more diverse student body to join her cheerleading squad, even suggesting that Sue add a student with a disability onto the team. Sue denounces Will’s suggestion, claiming, “As soon as a cheerleader rolls herself out onto the field in a wheelchair she becomes decidedly less effective at cheering people up. Just a fact.” Despite her unfounded and stereotypical justification to exclude people with disabilities from joining her cheerleading team, the Cheerios, she selects Becky Jackson, a young woman with Down syndrome to become the newest member of the squad.

In an ironic twist *Glee*’s character, Sue Sylvester, a cheerleading coach known for wreaking havoc on McKinley High School, especially McKinley’s glee club, provides the strongest and on several occasions meaningful commentary about disability. In the first season of the show the writers of *Glee* create an inside secret shared between the character of Sue and viewers. Given Sue’s previous comment about disability Will is skeptical of Sue choosing Becky to join the Cheerios. Unlike the characters in *Glee*, however, viewers know that Sue grew up with an older sister named Jean who has Down syndrome and that Jean is most likely the decision behind Sue picking Becky. Throughout the show Sue’s insight of disability as a nondisabled person poses a complex, but much-needed occurrence in *Glee*. In addition, the complexity regarding Sue being nondisabled disrupts disability studies popular analysis that when a nondisabled character is the person teaching about disability, such teaching often furthers the stigmatization and powerlessness of an individual with a disability. In his book *Why I*

Burned my Book and Other Essays on Disability (2003) historian Paul Longmore explains how characters with disabilities in film and television often lack insight about their life and even who they are as individuals until a nondisabled person guides the disabled character into a more empowered and loving self-awareness (138). When nondisabled people teach disabled and other nondisabled individuals about disability, it is feared that such instruction will rely on stereotypes of disability. Due to Sue Sylvester's relationship with her sister, however, Sue often steers clear of the misconceptions of disability and maintains a genuine knowledge about the experience of disability. Sue becomes the strongest advocate for people with disabilities on *Glee*. *Glee* never directly articulates Sue's unfounded kindness toward Becky in the show, but the audience is directed to connect Sue's relationship with her older sister Jean to Sue's relationship with Becky. Sue's relationship with her sister Jean, along with her hidden love of disability, most likely also contribute to Sue paying for three new wheelchair ramps for the school at the end of the episode of "Wheels". The character of Sue provides a refreshing look at the treatment of disability, especially when taking into account how disability is negatively treated and portrayed by other characters in *Glee*, as I will demonstrate in the rest of this chapter.

C. **Tragic Victim in Teen Television**

For many people having a disability is perceived as a tragedy. This is a point of view that former USA Paralympics quad rugby player Mark Zupan imagined following his spinal cord injury. In his autobiography "Gimp", Zupan describes his perspective of disability before and after his accident. "I could envision getting out of the hospital, but then anything past that point was like watching the gray static on a blank TV. What if I had to live with my family for the rest of my life, confined in a bed or stuck in a wheelchair? I didn't know one person in a chair and when I saw a crippled person at the movies or in the mall, I'd try to avoid eye contact with them

and pretend they didn't exist. They always seemed needy and weak and gross to me" (106). The themes of weak and needy along with confined to a bed that Zupan describes are typical myths about living life with a disability. These myths in particular are brought to life and presented in *Glee*'s episode "Laryngitis" (2010).

The storyline of "Laryngitis" focuses on lead singer of glee club, Rachel Berry, who loses her singing voice due to tonsillitis. When Rachel realizes she can no longer sing and may have to have surgery, she spirals into a self-deprecating depression, telling her ex-boyfriend Finn, "I am on my third day of antibiotics and I am not getting any better, which means I'm going to have to have that surgery, which means my life is over." Rachel continues, "I am my voice. I am like Tinkerbell Finn. I need applause to live." In response Rachel's ex-boyfriend, Finn, takes her to meet a friend.

When Finn and Rachel arrive at his friend's home, they wait while Finn's friend's mother checks to see if he is ready for visitors. As Finn and Rachel wait, Rachel notices a photograph of a good-looking young man wearing a football uniform. Rachel asks Finn if the guy in the photograph is his friend. Finn answers, "Yeah, we met at football camp a couple years ago." When Finn and Rachel enter Sean's room, he appears stuck in time, lying in a hospital bed, wearing the same football jersey that he was wearing in the photo Rachel commented on in the hallway. Sean is seemingly reliving his glory days. Sean addresses Finn, "This the hottie you were telling me about?" Finn quickly swaps introductions between Sean and Rachel. Sean directs his attention to Rachel. "Got a boyfriend Rachel?" Rachel looks at Finn confused. "Um, sort of." Sean responds, "Sort of? Sounds like I got a shot." Sean looks over at Finn. Finn smiles. Acting as if Sean isn't in the room Rachel whispers to Finn, "I don't understand. This isn't funny." Before Finn can respond, Sean replies, "Sorry. They make me see a shrink. He says I compensate

with humor.” Rachel looks startled and somewhat grief-stricken. Sean continues the conversation. “Finn says your voice is messed.” Then he asks Rachel if she’s going to regain her voice. Rachel says she doesn’t know. He asks Rachel if she is angry about losing her voice. Rachel gives a weak nod.

As Sean begins to identify with Rachel’s feelings of loss, describing in detail the anger he felt after acquiring his injury, she becomes uncomfortable and begins to exit Sean’s bedroom. “Finn shouldn’t have brought me here, I’m so sorry.” Finn stops her. Reluctantly Rachel listens to the rest of Sean’s story. She inquires if the moral of his story is to show that he is happier now. Sean answers, “Hell no. I’m miserable. I miss my body. I miss my life. I miss my friends. I miss girls. Over time I realized I was more than just one thing. Did you know I’m good at math? Seriously.” Regardless of Sean’s positive mention of his mathematical capabilities the rest of his speech implies that he cannot continue to have aspects of his body, friends, and girls now that he has a disability. Inevitably, Sean’s condition/disability paints his future as very lonely and grim. It is the exact picture that Zupan described after his accident. Despite the fact that it is a television show, I get an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach when I hear Weinstein’s character say, “They make me see a shrink, he says I compensate with humor,” because of the underlying message his statement gives. To compensate means to cover up an undesirable characteristic or quality that can be found in an object, or in this case a person, Weinstein. What exactly is the character of Sean compensating for? The lack of everything he mentioned above? I believe Weinstein means that he is compensating for having a disability. Even worse, he is compensating for his new life and who he is as a person. As a viewer, it seems unusual that Weinstein should have to compensate for anything given his intelligence and vocal prowess. Furthermore *Glee*’s characterization of Sean relies on one of the oldest stereotypes about people

with disabilities, the tragic victim. The tragic victim is often depicted not simply as someone who is being isolated, but someone who is immobile. Scholars Harlan D. Hahn and Todd L. Belt explain, “at one time, the visible indications of a disability were so heavily stigmatized that persons bearing these traits simply remained indoors or in ‘back bedrooms’ to avoid the humiliation of appearing in public” (455). Hahn and Belt continue. “Hence, many [people with disabilities] became isolated or reclusive” (455). Taking into account the environmental set up of Sean’s room (i.e, his laying in a hospital bed in the middle of the afternoon surrounded by medical equipment) and what he tells Rachel about missing friends and girls, the audience is led to believe that Sean never leaves his room, let alone his house. He is portrayed as weak and needy and in constant need of assistance from his mom. Not only has *Glee* portrayed Sean’s life as tragic but has ultimately empowered Rachel by allowing her to draw a new insight from Sean’s “poor circumstance”. Rachel’s newfound sense of empowerment touches upon another misguided belief that can arise between disabled and nondisabled individuals when they meet and/or form a friendship or romantic interest in one another. Tom Shakespeare elaborates, “Disabled people enable able-bodied people to feel good about themselves” (288). Prior to visiting Sean, Rachel believed the temporary loss of her voice due to laryngitis to be a life altering moment. After her visit with Sean, however, Rachel comes to realize how blessed she is because her life could be much worse. It could be like Sean’s life. Sadly, the episode of “Laryngitis” in *Glee* not only relies on, but reinforces the storyline of the “tragic victim” to portray disability to its viewers. Unfortunately the use of tragedy to depict disability continues in a later season of *Glee* and includes a focus on the popular idea of the “supercrip”.

D. **Embrace of “Tragedy” and the “Supercrip”**

Following the motif of tragedy, Quinn sustains a spinal cord injury, which results in the use of wheelchair, in the episode “On My Way” (2012). On Quinn’s first day back at school in the episode “Big Brother” (2012) she and Artie sing a duet for glee club. They sing “I’m Still Standing”. After they finish the song Quinn addresses Mr. Schuester and her fellow glee club members, stating, “There’s a lot of rumors flying around, so let’s clear the air. First of all, all my plumbing still works, which is awesome, but my spine was severely compressed in the car accident, which basically means I can’t move my feet or legs. But the good thing is I’m starting to regain feeling. So with a lot of physical therapy and your prayers I stand a good chance for full recovery.” Quinn then comments on how her wheelchair dance moves are not as great as Artie’s. Artie brushes Quinn’s compliment aside and assures her, “with practice they will be.” Immediately Quinn curtails Artie’s encouragement, declaring, “I promise by the time we go to nationals, I’ll be out of this chair and dancing on that stage.” Everyone begins to clap. Here, Quinn embraces the themes that create the “supercrip” stereotype. Like so many other characters with disabilities in mass media, Quinn is determined to overcome. She will walk again.

In an effort to support Quinn and her transition with her spinal cord injury, for their Senior Ditch Day Artie takes Quinn to one of his favorite spots. When they arrive at the wheelchair skating park Artie explains, “this is where we go to play on Senior Ditch Day. Or as I like to call it cripp skip.” At first Quinn is unsure. She appears nervous and out of her element. By the end of the day, however Quinn and Artie enjoy themselves as Artie teaches Quinn to brave the jumps and steep concrete sloops. As the day comes to an end, Quinn expresses her gratitude, “Thank you. This was a really great Senior Ditch Day. You were right.” Upon hearing Quinn’s comment Artie lets his guard down. He explains to Quinn that he wanted her to meet other

people that she could relate to and to show her that she isn't alone. However, not unlike Tina in the episode "Wheels", Quinn pushes Artie away, "yeah, but I'm not. This is only temporary. The doctor said it's a matter of time before..." Artie interjects Quinn. "Look I've been where you are. I know how it feels, but you can't keep denying..." Quinn fires back. "I'm not denying anything. You're not me, okay? I'm not like you. This isn't my life. I'm going to Yale. I'm getting out of Lima. And I'm gonna' walk again." Unlike the incident with Tina, however, Artie pushes against Quinn's denial to accept her disability. "And what if you don't? When are you going to stop pretending that this isn't really happening to you?" Quinn ignores Artie's questions and rolls away. Artie experiences déjà vu as he is left alone, staring after Quinn like he did with Tina two years earlier. Quinn's harsh behavior toward Artie could be interpreted, as her expressing her desire to walk again as well as recognizing that just because she and Artie have the same disability doesn't mean their experience will be the same. Another interpretation could be used to unearth the double meaning behind Quinn's words. In this alternative interpretation her words build the understanding that Artie won't leave Lima or that he won't attend an ivy-league university. In Quinn's mind you have to be nondisabled in order to be successful, because having a disability places people on the road to nowhere. Her thoughts reinforce the belief that disability is a tragedy. It also reinforces an earlier point made by Hughes, Russell, and Paterson that disability is a burden. In Quinn's mind the only way to progress forward in life is without a disability.

E. **Glee's Becky Jackson and Barriers to Sexuality**

Women with intellectual disabilities are viewed as sexually incapable and fragile. This narrow perspective of young women with disabilities as being seen as asexual or vulnerable is common practice in American society. Feminist scholar Corbett O'Toole and family counselor

Jennifer L. Bregante write, “Our society sees disability and sexuality as incompatible concepts,” (273). This misguided belief about the incompatibility of women with disabilities and sexuality is upheld in the episode “Silly Love Songs” (2011). In fact, “Silly Love Songs” not only portrays how disability and sexuality are incompatible, the episode suppresses Becky Jackson’s sexual expression and desire.

In an effort to raise money for glee club, quarterback of the football team and glee club’s lead male vocalist, Finn Hudson, decides to run a kissing booth at McKinley during Valentine’s Day week. The price is a dollar per kiss. In the first few scenes of the episode, Finn flips the sign on the booth to “in”. He is officially open for business. The first girl to approach Finn for a kiss is Becky Jackson. Becky walks toward the booth with a handful of dollar bills. Finn smiles and gives a polite “uh,” as he slides a single bill from the stack Becky holds. He leans in and gives Becky a light-quick kiss on the cheek and thanks her. Her turn is over. Given the handful of dollar bills it is obvious that Becky wanted her money’s worth. Finn’s peck on the cheek skirts around Becky’s message—*I’m a woman too!* More importantly a kiss on the cheek is a maneuver often saved for family members or children. It is also a polite way to convey sexual disinterest and/or attraction to somebody. Since Becky is not a family member, there is only one conclusion to draw. He is not interested in Becky. While it is Finn’s choice to kiss whom he would like and how, I find Finn’s choice to kiss Becky on the cheek to be an odd decision. Finn’s decision triggers curiosity because throughout the rest of the episode viewers witness Finn kissing all the other young women donating money on the lips, except his ex-girlfriend, Rachel, who he also kisses on the cheek. His decision to kiss Rachel is to avoid awkwardness and confusion between them. While Rachel is also denied access to Finn’s lips, there is a reason given as to why. Becky on the other hand is sent away with a thank you and is ultimately cheated

out of her dollar. In the end there is no explanation given to why Finn refused to kiss Becky on the lips, but it does raise an interesting question as to whether Finn's lack of action points to a discriminatory attitude on his part toward Becky Jackson. Did Finn not kiss Becky because he was uncomfortable kissing a young woman with Down syndrome? While there is no solid evidence of discrimination in the episode, the possibility of discrimination is worth mentioning since Becky was the only girl in the school besides Rachel to be kissed on the cheek. Also the fact remains that of all the girls kissed by Finn Becky is the only one with a known disability.

In the third season, however, Becky's sexual expression blossoms. The episode "I Am A Unicorn" (2011) attempts to provide the character of Becky Jackson with greater depth. After a heated argument between Mr. Schuester and Quinn Fabray, Becky exclaims with monotone humor, "that was sexy," addressing Mr. Schuester's role in the argument. Her line is delivered with a perfect blend of nonchalance and surety, making her bold comment both meaningful and hilarious. More importantly, unlike her experience at the kissing booth Becky's comment cannot be dismissed. She is heard loud and clear. Will Schuester is sexy.

In contrast to "I Am A Unicorn", however, the fourth season's episode "Glee Actually" (2012) pushes Becky's sexuality over the top. In the opening sequence the show tries to provide a positive interpretation as to why Artie has a disability. After slipping on the ice and crashing Artie expresses frustration with his disability. To ease Artie's displeasure the episode plunges into a dream sequence. During the dream Artie's fellow glee club member Rory appears. He acts as a guide for Artie as they travel through his alternative life and how his being nondisabled impacted the people he knew when he was disabled. Artie learns Quinn died from her spinal cord injury. Quinn's untimely death is a striking parallel to Tiny Tim's experience in *A Christmas Carol*. To take an even weirder turn *Glee* casts Becky Jackson in an irresponsible light. As they

continue Artie's journey to learn the importance of why Artie has a disability, Rory introduces Artie to the school "slut" Becky. In this scene in *Glee* Becky is represented as hypersexual. The stereotype of "hypersexual" is often applied to people with disabilities, particularly to people who have intellectual disabilities. History professor Steven Noll writes concerning how the 1900s was a time when sterilization of people with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities was common practice (Noll 67). Authors Elizabeth Tilley, Jan Walmesly, Sarah Earle, and Dorothy Atkinson expand on Noll's position, clarifying, "that people with intellectual disabilities were targets because of societal fears about 'mentally deficient' people outnumbering those of 'normal' intelligence" (415). They go on to further their explanation, detailing the specifics of how women with intellectual disabilities are often perceived, stating, "Women with intellectual disabilities have been and are regarded as sexually wayward and unruly" (Tilley, Walmsley, Earle, and Atkinson 416). Despite *Glee*'s creative approach to shine a positive light onto why Artie is disabled, the show's portrayal of Becky as over sexualized and aggressive curtails *Glee*'s efforts to provide a broader understanding of disability.

F. **Concluding Mixed Messages in *Glee***

While there are small glimmers of positive representation of disability in *Glee* found in the character of Sue Sylvester and her relationship with her sister Jean and Becky Jackson, both of whom have Down syndrome; *Glee* fails to provide a positive and modern understanding of disability. All of the characters with disabilities in *Glee* fall into familiar stereotypical traps created by mass media. For instance the character of Artie becomes prey to the "maladjusted disabled person" as he requires nondisabled education to think positively about having a disability. Even more disappointing, the character of Sean pulls on viewer's heartstrings as he is portrayed as the "tragic victim" in need of pity and gives the nondisabled person insight about

their life. Unsurprisingly former cheerleading captain Quinn Fabray raises the audience's hope as she fights her disability and ultimately walks again. Disturbingly *Glee*'s Becky Jackson plays into the audience's beliefs about people with intellectual disability and sexuality, as she is shown as both "asexual" and "hypersexual". Despite *Glee*'s intentions with including disability into its storylines, the show relies on old representations and misconceptions to tell stories about disability. Such stories only further incorrect assumptions and beliefs about disability and how disabled people live their lives. Therefore I turn to other television shows geared toward adolescents who are providing an alternative representation of disability in their characters featured with disabilities. The first ground-breaking teen television drama I discuss is *Friday Night Lights*.

III. COMPLICATING STEREOTYPES: MOVING TOWARD PROGRESS IN *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*, *PRETTY LITTLE LIARS*, AND *YOLK*

A. *Friday Night Lights: Glimpses of Disability Culture*

In the previous chapter I argued how the TV show *Glee* continues to lean on old stereotypes to represent youth with disabilities on television. The first section of this chapter will discuss and examine ten episodes from the television series *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011). In this section of the chapter these ten episodes will demonstrate how the character of Jason Street challenges the stereotype of the “supercrip” and “tragic victim”. In addition the last few episodes show Jason’s battle with the temptation of the cure. The analysis of *Friday Night Lights* will point to a new direction of representing disability in the entertainment industry.

An American television drama, *Friday Night Lights*, debuted on NBC on October 3, 2006. *Friday Night Lights*, a primarily sports-driven television drama, brought a surprising twist to nightly network television. Unlike other popular teen television shows that typically display highly desirable and uniform bodies, *Friday Night Lights* took an alternative route. Going against the norm in 2006 and continuing until its final airdate in 2011, *Friday Night Lights* explored the topic of disability. Unlike *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights* guides viewers to a realistic and gritty understanding of what it is like to live with a disability. This task is accomplished by the creators of *Friday Night Lights* decision to focus on the slow and steady path that the character Jason Street leads after receiving a spinal cord injury. In the show Street embarks on a journey and process of transitioning from an able-bodied young man to a young man who is learning to live his life with a spinal cord injury. The strong character development of Jason Street and his transition into disability on *Friday Night Lights* is a pivotal and promising shift in mass media’s knowledge and representation of disability within Hollywood. I argue that *Friday Night Lights* illustrates an increasing positive direction of portraying disability in television, particularly in

showing youth with disabilities an empowered role as well as the positive impact of the disability community.

1. **Opening game of the season**

High school senior Jason Street is the leader and shining star of the Dillon Panthers. He is the hometown hero for the close-knit community of Dillon, Texas. Street is an all-American young man loved by all. Without a doubt Jason Street will lead the Dillon Panthers high school football team to the State Championship and then victory...

Dillon, Texas, 2006, first game of the season: Floodlights illuminate the freshly trimmed grass of the Dillon Panthers football field. Team captain and quarterback, Jason Street, reenergizes his teammates in the second half of the game. The Panthers are down. Street throws the ball. The pass is intercepted. The opposing player charges down the field. With the ball nestled in the crook of his arm the player continues toward the end of the field, unstoppable. Street watches. He realizes he has the last opportunity to block the unwanted touchdown. Just like a hundred, maybe a thousand times since peewee league, Street moves to cut the rival player off of his intended course. Jason crashes into his opponent. Jason spins in the air and slams facedown into the turf. Immediately the game and onlookers stall. Street doesn't move. One by one the opposing team positions into a one-knee kneel on the field. Medical coaches and team officials run to Jason's sprawled body. Jason Street remains immobilized on his hometown field.

2. **Construction of the supercrip**

For many residents of Dillon, Texas Jason's spinal cord injury represents a fall of a hero. Despite the fall of local football hero Jason Street, the town of Dillon unknowingly begins to fashion a new hero identity for Jason. Jason's family and friends greet his new body with opposition. The residents of Dillon stress the need for Jason to be whole again. Church

signs read, “PRAY FOR JASON STREET”. Inside Jason’s family church the minister preaches, “As an entire community we have come together in prayer and hope and faith. And with these prayers, this thing, this hope, I believe Jason Street will once again walk in on his own two feet and join this congregation and rejoice with us.” The push for Jason’s recovery continues outside of the church walls as Jason’s girlfriend Lyla shares her thoughts with a few church members, “...we know he’s going to be fine. He’s going to walk again.” Immediately the town resists Jason’s new body. Disability is an unexpected and unwanted occurrence.

Dillon’s optimism for a recovery unintentionally begins to tilt Jason Street’s process of transitioning into overly-trodden territory of the overcoming narrative. This narrative is often presented in the entertainment industry. The portrayal of overcoming often features a character with a disability, illness, or injury as they work to overpower and ultimately eradicate their new bodily difference through the use of sheer will and physical domination. The storyline of overcoming usually falls in line with the idea of the “supercrip”. Academic researcher Alison Harnett indicates that the role of the “supercrip” is “often portrayed as remarkable achievers, ‘supercrips’, who against all odds, triumph over the tragedy of their condition...the supercrip stereotype depicts a disabled person who, through astounding personal endeavor overcomes their disability—a cripple learns to walk” (22). This idea becomes Dillon’s dream of Jason. Shortly thereafter, their dream begins to create a supercrip identity for him. Lyla tells Jason the story of a man who against all odds “beat” his spinal cord injury. While the stereotype of the supercrip has been tiredly overused in television, as is seen with the example of Quinn Fabray who regains the use of her legs in *Glee*, the show *Friday Nights Lights* creates a new spin to the use of ‘supercrip’. The creators of *Friday Night Lights* go against the popular stereotype of the

'supercrip'. *Friday Night Lights* follows Jason's journey as he learns to adapt and embrace his transition of living with a disability.

The transition and journey of acceptance of disability is not an easy road as *Friday Night Lights* shows. The second episode, "Eyes Wide Open" (2006) tackles the loss of independence that many youth with disabilities endure. Viewers are immediately introduced to Jason's reluctance of allowing people to treat him differently due to his disability. Regardless of his persistence, the path of transitioning for Jason is not easy. He soon learns that he must fight for the freedom and independence he once had as a nondisabled teen. The beginning stages of this battle for his independence can be viewed in a scene at the hospital when Jason asks the doctor about the severity of his condition. "What about my legs, doc?" Before the doctor can answer, Jason's mother interjects, "we'll just keep prayin' and then once you start physical therapy..." Jason ignores his mother's diversion. Again, he addresses the doctor. "All you got to do is tell me the truth." Despite Jason's mother's efforts to circumvent the truth of Jason's condition, Jason fights for control to retrieve information about his body. Jason has won the battle against his mother's overprotective nature. It is a small victory. Jason's struggle to maintain a sense of independence is a reoccurring barrier in the TV series. In a later scene Jason must once again confront his mother's coddling. As they begin to watch the Dillon Panthers football game on television she asks, "You sure you want to watch it?" Jason immediately urges his mother against turning off or changing the television. "Leave it, please." The ability to maintain the same level of independence becomes harder for youth after they acquire a spinal cord injury.

In the third episode titled "Wind Sprints" (2006), similar to Jason's mom, Lyla boasts of Jason's soon-to-be "full" recovery. She states, "In one year you'll be back on track." Tired, Jason snaps. "Lyla, STOP it! STOP! My legs are never gonna' get better. Ever." Instead of listening to

Jason Lyla tries to extinguish Jason's so-called pessimism by getting his 'hopes up'. "But there are cases, lots of cases where people..." Jason interjects. "And those cases aren't me, alright? I don't even have full use of my hands. I'll be lucky if I get that back. I can't even get my own shoes on and off. How can you not see that? WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" Calmly, Lyla answers, "I'm just trying to help." Jason argues, "Yeah, well you're not helping. You want to help, then stop pretending that everything's ok." Though Jason's response is harsh he is forcing Lyla to reevaluate the reality of his accident. Despite Lyla wanting everything to go back to normal, Jason knows that it won't, that it can't. Furthermore he is taking control of the beliefs surrounding the accident and his body. He is showing that just because his thoughts do not match the town of Dillon, his mother or Lyla does not make Jason wrong. More importantly, Jason's declaration that his body is different, that his life is going to be different go against the traditional portrayals of people with disabilities in mass media who are adamant about returning their bodies to what they once were. Jason refuses to embrace the role of the "supercrip", instead seeking to accept the differences with his body.

3. **Shift from the role of football hero and relationships**

In addition to the narratives of overcoming and supercrips that are often associated with newly acquired disabilities, there is another popular narrative to account for: Heroism. Heroism in the context of disability plays a significant role in how society treats disability, at least for a short time. Author David A. Gerber explains the status of being a war veteran, "On one hand, the veteran's heroism and sacrifices are memorialized and debts of gratitude, both symbolic and material, are paid to him. On the other hand, the veteran also inspires anxiety and fear and is seen as a threat to social order" (546). While Jason is not a veteran returned from war, Gerber's theory can be applied to Jason's experiences as Dillon's

hometown hero, newly injured. As articulated by Gerber, Americans tend to celebrate veterans' initial return and sacrifice and shortly thereafter, go back to their daily lives, leaving veterans alone and often forgotten. In a similar scenario the fall of the hometown hero due to disability is not exempt from abandonment and maltreatment. Despite being alive, Jason Street's life is memorialized. Immediately following his accident Jason Street is honored. His name enters pep speeches before a big game. His status and talent leave the backup quarterback feeling uncertain and nervous. And during the second episode "Eyes Wide Open" (2006) Coach Taylor gives Jason a signed football by everyone on the team. After his accident Jason Street experiences a dramatic difference in his social life and his previous relationships. In the episode "Wind Sprints" Jason struggles with the absence of his best friend: Tim Riggins refuses to see Jason in the hospital. Meanwhile after Jason tells Lyla that his life is never going to be the same and that he is never going to get better, he orders her to leave. On her way home from the hospital Lyla finds Tim walking on the side of the road in the middle of a rainstorm. She pulls over. Lyla gets out of the car and berates Tim with accusations of selfishness. Her anger at Tim for not going to visit his best friend in the hospital boils over. In the midst of Lyla's heated tirade, Jason's two closest confidants find themselves sharing a passionate and heartbroken kiss, which leads to a guilt-ridden affair. Jason is left in the dark about the events that are happening outside the hospital walls. To complicate matters, doubt and misconception often fill the lives of individuals who are shedding their nondisabled identity and entering a new identity as a person living with a disability.

Such a transition becomes a fight of determination and a journey of acceptance. Doctor and Director of Rehabilitative Services and Clinical Services M.J. Mulcahey articulates in her article "Returning to School After a Spinal Cord Injury: Perspectives from four Adolescents"

that “The process of independence is abruptly reversed as a result of spinal cord injury. The need for physical care and assistance in mobility and self-care infantilizes adolescents” (307). A strong example of feeling infantilized can be seen in the episode “El Accidente” (2006). During a visiting session Jason and Lyla start to become intimate when a nurse walks in unannounced. Immediately, Lyla hops off the bed, looking slightly uncomfortable. After Lyla leaves the hospital she visits Tim. She tells Tim that she’s ending their affair, saying, “Jason’s getting back to his old self.” Despite Jason being the same person, Lyla’s comment demonstrates that she has failed to see this.

Later that night, Tim visits Jason. Tim’s visit, however, does not happen through his own efforts. Coach Taylor brings the players to see Jason at the rehabilitation center before they head out to play their next game. Each player greets Jason with words of optimism and a promise to win the game. It is their first time seeing Jason since the opening game of the season. Tim brings up the rear. He hesitates before stepping forward, then approaches his best friend. As he gazes at Street lying in a hospital bed Tim begins to cry. As quickly as he came, Tim exits his best friend’s room. Jason is left alone.

The next day Jason calls Tim on the phone and asks Tim to come see him at the rehabilitation center. Tim agrees. Hours later Tim arrives, and enters Jason’s room. Jason politely listens to Tim’s excuse as to why it took him so long to arrive. When Tim finishes his story Jason does not waste any time. He fills his best friend in on what he’s missed in the weeks since his accident:

Let me go ahead and recap my life for you over the last couple of weeks... My day starts out me lying down in this bed. Well, pretty much the whole day takes place with me lying down on this bed on my sorry quadriplegic ass. Every day

people come in here and poke and prod at me like I'm a piece of meat. Go ahead and stick a catheter in me in places you don't even want to know about. My big adventure of the day is, is going to the commode, 'cause I got to go the same time every day so I can teach my body to crap on cue.

Jason's anger and frustration is apparent in his description of the changes he has had to undergo since the accident. Unlike Sean and Quinn from *Glee*, however, Jason's dissatisfaction in this scene is not directed at the disability itself, but rather at his friend Tim for not being there for him. Tim is responsible for his lack of friendship with Jason, not Jason, and certainly not Jason's body. From Jason's perspective, viewers come to understand that Jason's disability is not a barrier. Dillon's lack of knowledge about disability and how to accept it provides the greatest hindrance for Jason and his various relationships. Unexpectedly Jason's relationships are falling apart around him and he is no longer the beloved captain of the Dillon Panthers football team.

4. **Dillon (dis)honors disability**

In an episode titled "Homecoming" (2006), Jason receives a visit from Coach Taylor. Coach Taylor asks Jason if he would join the team on the field in the opening ceremony of the homecoming football game. Jason tells Coach Taylor he'll think about his offer. Later, Jason relays Coach Taylor's idea to his rehabilitation roommate Herc. Herc dismisses the idea and shares a story with Jason about a guy who had ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, and how the team rolled him out onto the field and rubbed his head for luck before the game. "It was sick, bro." Jason responds, "What's wrong with it? It sounds fine to me." Herc intervenes Jason's line of thinking. "Well, that's because you're an idiot. Why would you want them to make you into a pathetic mascot, huh?" Jason fails to understand Herc's perspective, arguing, "It's not a mascot, man. I'd be honored." This scene between Herc and Jason is important

because it shows a level of disability studies awareness. Instead of seeing Coach Taylor's offer to Jason as a compliment, Herc looks at the offer from a different perspective and challenges it. Thinking similar like many disability studies scholars Herc views the offer as offensive and demeaning. Another noteworthy occurrence in this scene is the connection between Herc and Jason. While the connection is not immediately apparent, a few scenes later Jason's connection with Herc shines through. During a phone conversation with Lyla Jason demonstrates that he's taken Herc's comments into consideration. "I just don't know if I'm ready to face everybody yet. It's embarrassing being the center of attention and all." Lyla dismisses Jason's worry. "Like you're not used to that?" Jason replies, "for football maybe, not for being hurt. I mean come on, it's like, hey everybody, come check out the freak show." Lyla disagrees, "It's not like that." Jason concedes. "Yeah, it'll be fine. Everything will be fine." Again, Lyla dismisses Jason's point of view, believing that the event will be good for him. She fails to understand the exploitative nature that can and most likely will result in Jason's participation in the opening ceremony of the homecoming football game. *Friday Night Lights'* knowledge of disability and perhaps even its historical significance heighten Jason's awareness of pride in connection to his disability. Street's mere mention of freak show in relation to being posed as a mascot at the homecoming game correlates to the treatment of people with disabilities who worked and were often exploited during the popularity of freak shows (Shakespeare 287). Despite his newfound understanding, as promised Jason agrees to join the Dillon Panthers on the football field.

When Jason breaks through the Dillon Panther's banner he is "honored" with stunned silence. Jason stares back at the crowd. After the initial shock sets in, the game announcer commands the crowd to welcome back "honorary Dillon captain Jason Street!" The crowd obeys and cheers as Jason rolls out onto the field. In response Jason puts his fist in the air. As the game

starts the camera pans to Jason who is sitting on the sidelines of the field clapping along with the rest of the crowd as the Panthers play. Jason's unsmiling face is unreadable. The camera shot however tells a clear story, Jason no longer belongs on the Panther's football field, and he is an outsider.

In "Who's Your Daddy" (2006) Tyra, a fellow classmate, tells Jason, "Something like this shouldn't happen to a good person like you." While Tyra's comment is well meaning, it is an unintentional slap in the face. "Something like this." Something like -- what? Something like disability? Disability is terrifying. It is terrifying to imagine. It is even terrifying to say—to call disability what it is, because disability inspires fear. Loss. "*This*" is most likely an unconscious attempt by Tyra to lessen the full impact of the term—existence of disability. To the town of Dillon, Texas, disability is a tragedy. Disability is given an even stronger understanding of disability as tragedy within media. British researcher in disability studies Tom Shakespeare agrees, "Media treatments depoliticize struggles of disabled people by always taking an individualized perspective, focusing on disability as personal misfortune" (284). More importantly, disabled is a type of person that one should never aspire to or hope to become, a line of thinking that Historian Paul Longmore takes note of: "Popular entertainments depicting disabled characters allude to these fears and prejudices or address them obliquely or fragmentarily, seeking to reassure us about ourselves" (132). In this same episode Jason is introduced to his roommate Herc at the rehabilitation center. The character of Herc is a catalyst to improving Dillon's limited perspective on disability. Throughout Street's time in rehabilitation Herc educates Jason about his new life. Herc doesn't sugar coat the changes Jason will experience:

Actually, I know everything about your life. Let me run down the next two years for you. You're still in a golden 'everyone rallies around you' phase. They'll start to get bored with that in about six weeks and then all the letters and cards and visits and prayers will die down dramatically. And another three months after that your girlfriend is gonna tell ya all about how you're different people now and how you need to find out how you are apart... Then maybe about two months after that the lawsuit will be in full swing and you will lose people who mean the world to you so you can pay for fun things... and then about three or four months after that your parents will announce that the stress you caused...

Despite Herc's seemingly grim timeline, Herc makes Jason's transition into living with a disability promising. Throughout the series Herc is Jason's mentor. An important factor to take into account is Herc's demeanor, unlike Artie's attempt in "Big Brother" (2012) to include Quinn in disability culture at the wheelchair skating park. Artie lacks confidence and pride. Herc on the other hand exudes and showcases a generous amount of surety, strength and power. Herc is a person who is comfortable in his own skin. Herc supports Jason through his transition with a spinal injury.

In the episode "Homecoming" (2006) Jason mentions that life is not what it used to be. Herc responds, "It's all relative QB." Herc's interpretation questions the importance of what is considered important to individuals. To Herc physicality is versatile. So is the way that people live their lives. Herc provides a counterbalance to the residents of Dillon who believe Jason will achieve less due to his disability. A strong example of Dillon's new perspective of Jason can be found in *Friday Night Lights*' episode "Little Girl I Wanna Marry You" (2007). In this episode Jason defends his love for Lyla to her father Buddy Garrity after he finds out Buddy has tried to

push Lyla toward other guys. “If I was still the quarterback and wasn’t the town cripple. You wouldn’t be settin’ your daughter on dates.” Buddy retaliates, “Now son, you know that everybody in this family loves you. We always have and we’ve supported you ever since you were a little bitty boy.” Jason fights back. “Please, please do not patronize me, Mr. Garrity.” This exchange between Jason and Buddy Garrity is a powerful demonstration of a person with a disability using their voice as a tool of resistance. Jason is not passive, as is often portrayed with characters with disabilities in mass media. Tom Shakespeare, elaborates that most characters with disabilities in television and film are portrayed as “passive, akin to animals, objects rather than subjects” (287). During this scene Jason makes it clear to Buddy he is not going to be lessened because his body has changed. At the same time viewers come to understand through Mr. Garrity’s attitude that Street may not live up to his full expectations, regardless of Street’s present journey into self-empowerment. For many viewers who are not familiar with seeing the disability empowerment narrative, the familiar comfort of the ‘father knows best’ sentiment can easily troupe *Friday Night Lights’* sincere effort to provide a progressive framing of disability in teen television. However, in a later scene with Lyla Jason’s strong connection with Herc brings viewer’s attention back around:

I started to think about Herc and why I like him so much...He took his handicap and he didn’t settle for just becoming as good as he was before. He tried to become a better man and he did and I think that if I could be more like him, maybe I wouldn’t be such a bad guy to be around.

The comfort and sense of belonging and finding of self that occurs for Jason Street when he is around Herc highlights the power that the disability community and cultural identification

can have for people with disabilities, particularly for youth with disabilities. Furthermore, Jason Street has found a role model in Herc, simply because he can relate to Herc and his disability.

5. The cure

In addition to *Friday Night Lights*' nuanced portrayal of transitioning with a disability, the show incorporates a multi-dimensional look into the experience of living with a disability. The depiction of disability would not be complete without the representation of the struggles that being a person with a disability in a majority non-disabled society lives. Three episodes in the second season of *Friday Night Lights* sheds light onto one of the most controversial topics in the disability community: the *cure*. *Friday Night Lights*' stance on the subject of the *cure* is bold. In an almost unprecedented route in popular mass media *Friday Night Lights* frames the topic of the *cure* from the disability rights perspective. Despite Jason Street's previous disability empowerment, the episodes "Bad Ideas" (2007), "Are You Ready For Friday Night" (2007), and "Let's Get It On" (2007) follow Jason as he travels to Mexico in search of a doctor performing test trials of a stem cell procedure that is rumored to cure spinal cord injury. At the beginning of the episode "Bad Ideas" (2007) Street receives the tip about the alleged doctor from special guest star Mark Zupan, a real-life former quad rugby player for the USA Paralympics team. As Jason is leaving his doctor's appointment he runs into Mark in the lobby. Mark greets Jason. "Hey dude, what's up?" Jason shakes his head. "Same old crap. Just telling me I'll never walk again. Again." Taking note of Jason's mood, Mark gives Jason something to think about "I know this guy, he does some experimental stem cell surgeries down in Mexico. I've heard they're doing really good with it." Mark's information sets off a chain reaction for Jason. In the following episode, "Are You Ready For Friday Night" (2007), Jason and Herc sit on the outside of a wheelchair rugby court. Jason tells Herc what Mark told him. Herc responds,

“Let me ask you, are you trying to be a cliché?...Stem cell surgery in Mexico...let me check my watch. Yep, been about a year. Yeah, you’re actually right on time for the miracle surgery.”

Jason deflects Herc’s joke. “It’s not a miracle surgery.” Herc laughs, but Jason continues to push his point. “I’m not crazy, alright? This isn’t insane. They’re getting great results with rats, they’re getting movement back in their hind legs from this.” Despite Jason’s explanation Herc tries to reason with Jason. “I hate to break it to you buddy, but you don’t have hind legs, so you’re screwed. I wanted to walk too, we all did”, pointing to the guys playing quad rugby on the court. He continues, “but you actually thinking you going do it again. People will take advantage of that, Street. They’ll take your money and what’s left of your dignity. It’s a scam QB. Don’t say you weren’t warned.” Despite Herc’s advice Jason chooses to go to Mexico. Tim joins him.

In a later episode “Let’s Get It On” (2007) Lyla joins Tim and Jason in Mexico. As they relax on a boat, Tim shares his thoughts, “Listen man, we’ve been talking. We don’t think this stem cell thing is such a great idea.” Lyla joins the conversation, adding to Tim’s statement, “I’ve been researching for weeks.” Jason refutes both of their points. “I want out of this chair, alright? Not next month. Not next year, but I want out now. This is the way to do that. And neither of you can look me in the eye and tell me what it’s like to live in this chair, so I’m going to do this. You all can’t stop me.” Shortly after the argument Jason is left alone, as Tim and Lyla have moved to different areas of the boat. Feeling angry, powerless and without options Jason pushes himself over the edge off the boat and falls into the ocean. As Jason continues to sink toward the bottom of the ocean he changes his mind. Jason swims up to the surface and to the nearest shore. When Lyla and Tim find Jason lying on the beach, Lyla sits beside Jason and asks, “What were you thinking?” Jason looks at her and then answers. “I wasn’t. I’m sorry. I’m not going to have the surgery. Let’s go back to Texas.” While it seems like Jason is digressing from the positive nature

of having a disability in these three episodes, *Friday Night Lights* shows a side that is often not spoken about publicly by people with disabilities who are proud of who they are. It is the recognition of frustration and pain and ultimately feeling a sense of loss due to one's disability. Furthermore, Jason's choice not to go through with the experimental stem cell surgery goes against many of the traditionally held beliefs that disability is a tragedy and that disability is "something" that needs to be overcome or cured. It also disrupts the idea that death is a preferred option over living with a disability. This take is not commonly shown in Hollywood as can be evidenced in the film *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). Toward the end of the film professional boxer Maggie acquires a spinal cord injury during a boxing match. At the hospital Maggie asks her trainer Frank to interfere with her life support equipment so she can die with dignity, instead of having to live with a disability. In contrast to Maggie, at the end of the episode "Let's Get It On" (2007) Jason accepts his disability and returns to Dillon.

6. Concluding *Friday Night Lights*

The NBC television sports drama *Friday Night Lights* introduces audiences to a consistently positive representation of disability. In contrast to Quinn in *Glee* who embraces the stereotype of the "supercrip" and seeks to conquer her spinal cord injury, Jason refuses to play into the "supercrip" stereotype. Going against the efforts of the people he loves, Jason accepts the fact that he has a spinal cord injury and that his life will be different. In another decision opposite from Quinn who rejects Artie's friendship, Jason forms a special connection and relationship with his rehabilitation roommate Herc. Under Herc's mentorship Jason comes to understand that disability is deeper than the body. His conversations with Herc teach Jason that disability has its own social, political and cultural struggles. Through this friendship with Herc, *Friday Night Lights* demonstrates the positive impact that a person with a disability can have for

a disabled young person who is trying to make sense of what living with a disability means in his or her life. Furthermore *Friday Night Lights* takes a progressive route in representation of disability by allowing viewers to witness how Jason's journey with a disability teeters between positive and negative feelings. This balance provides a realistic depiction of disability without incorporating a pitying tone, as seen in the case of the character of Sean in *Glee*. In contrast to *Glee* the show *Friday Night Lights* provides a brilliant and honest approach to disability without stumbling into stereotypical traps of the "tragic victim" or "supercrip". *Friday Night Lights* clearly separates the understanding between sympathy and empathy in relation to having a disability, a distinction that *Glee* cannot or simply refuses to accomplish. This new path in representing disability in mass media will continue in the next section of this chapter as this work explores the stereotype of the "villain" and girl culture in the teen television drama *Pretty Little Liars*.

B. Pretty Little Liars: Complicating "Mean Girl" and "Disability Villain"

In the previous section of this thesis I demonstrated how *Friday Night Lights* creates a shift in the representation of disability in teen television. Here, I continue my investigation of how disability is being newly represented in teen dramas. To do this, I will analyze seven episodes of the television drama *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present). Each of the episodes examines and highlights how the character of Jenna Cavanaugh escapes typical stereotypes of disability, such as the "villain" and the "evil avenger". More important, my analysis will extend outside of the representation of disability and crossover into unfamiliar territory in disability studies by looking at the concept of girl culture. By incorporating girl culture into this work I will demonstrate how the character of Jenna falls under the popular stereotype perpetuated by American culture, the mean girl. Jenna's role as the mean girl will be examined in her use of

relational aggression and social aggression to impact and control the people in her life. The focus of aggression discussed throughout this chapter will support my argument that the character of Jenna Cavanaugh plays within the perimeters of girl culture, making her an active participant, despite being blind.

In the fall of 2010 the ABC Family network broadcast an original series, *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present), based on the popular young adult novel series written by author Sara Shepard. The teen television drama follows the story of a group of four high school girls—Hanna, Spencer, Aria, and Emily—who had previously been best friends since junior high. By their junior year of high school, however, the girls are living opposite lives since their ringleader, Alison, disappeared the previous year. None of the girls know what happened to their best friend, but each of them has a *secret*. It is their secrets that bring the girls back together and solidifies their friendship. And the biggest secret of all focuses on the question of what really happened to a young woman named Jenna Cavanaugh.

1. **Girl culture and disability**

During the initial creation of this thesis I believed that young women with disabilities were excluded from participating in activities associated with girl culture. Critical analysis of the teen drama *Pretty Little Liars*, however, proved this theory to be incorrect. In a spectacular finding, the show *Pretty Little Liars* demonstrates how disability and girl culture are coexisting, or at least are commingling. Social historian Joan Jacob Brumberg defines girl culture as “the key for understanding what it means to be a young woman today or in the past” (Greenfield and Brumberg 5). More importantly, Brumberg goes on to list the most utilized activities which fashion the experience of *girl culture* and its impacts:

Their cliques and friendships, and the garden-variety body projects that are central to their self-definition and to the American-economy: making up, tanning, waxing and shaving, shopping for cosmetics and clothes... (Greenfield and Brumberg 6).

Taking Brumberg's definition of girl culture into account, girl culture is not simply the differences found between boys and girls, but includes particular activities sought out by young women to transform how they look. More importantly girl culture is also the heart of how many young women with disabilities form their relationships with one another. Unfortunately, girl culture does not always foster healthy friendships between young women. In her book "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls" (2002) author Rachel Simmons describes the volatile nature of young women, a nature that has come to be understood in popular culture as typical behavior practiced among girls and young women. The acceptance of aggression in young women by American culture is a point Simmons draws attention to in her book, stating: "schools write off girls' conflicts as a rite of passage, as simply 'what girls do'" (16). This argument is strengthened in *Pretty Little Liars'* episode "Someone to Watch Over Me" (2011) during a scene featuring one of the main characters, Hanna, and her boyfriend Caleb. In the midst of an argument Caleb defends his spying on Hanna and her friends for Jenna, claiming, "I thought it was just some generic bitchiness [sic] among all the pretty girls." Caleb's comment to Hanna supports the popular belief that young women are intentionally cruel to one another. Hanna and Jenna's aggressive behavior toward each other is accepted as a fact of life by Caleb, rather than a concern or a curiosity. Another example that supports the aggressive behavior of young women can be found in the satirical film *Mean Girls* (2004), which has become a classic depiction of the ruthless and feral nature between young women.

2. Disability's debut into normative girl culture

In the second episode, "The Jenna Thing" (2010), Jenna Cavanaugh returns to Rosewood after being away in Philadelphia for a year. When Jenna returns Spencer, Hanna, Aria and Emily avoid her. Their oppressive behavior toward Jenna stems from their distrust of Jenna, since Jenna was an enemy with the girls' missing friend Ali. The other reason behind the girls' behavior is because they know what and/or *who* caused Jenna to become blind.

In "The Jenna Thing," during their lunch break Aria invites Jenna to sit with her and the girls at their table. Jenna accepts and allows Aria to guide her to where the other girls are sitting. After Jenna sits down, she tells the girls about how Ali came to visit her at the hospital after the accident. The girls are shocked by this news. Jenna states, "everyone misunderstood Alison, but I knew exactly who she was." Following Jenna's comment Spencer asks, "When did you get back Jenna? We heard you were in Philadelphia, a school for the...visually impaired." Jenna responds with a smile. "You can say blind Spencer. It's okay. It's not a dirty word." Silence spreads around the table. Unabashedly, Jenna breaks it. "Wow, so quiet. You guys used to be the fun table. What happened to you girls?" Immediately following Jenna's question viewers are shown a flash back scene when Ali was still in the girls' lives.

In the scene Ali and the girls sneak onto the Cavanaugh's property to teach Toby Cavanaugh, Jenna's stepbrother, a lesson for supposedly watching the girls through Spencer's bedroom window. As the girls walk up to the Cavanaugh's garage, Ali breaks rank and opens the garage door. She lights a stink bomb and throws it inside. Ali instructs the girls to run. As they do, the girls turn back and watch as the garage unexpectedly catches fire. Shocked and scared the girls continue to run and take shelter nearby. They watch as the garage burns. Then they see

Toby run out of the garage carrying an unmoving Jenna in his arms. Their trick, meant for Toby, unintentionally causes Jenna to become blind.

Their guilt for what happened causes the girls to suspect the worst in Jenna. Toward the end of the episode of “The Jenna Thing” (2010) Spencer is jogging through Rosewood. As she rounds a corner, she spots Jenna sitting on a bench typing on her assistive technology equipment. Spencer stops and watches as Jenna finishes writing a message. Jenna pulls out a cell phone. She gives a command into the receiver, “send text now.” This transaction, witnessed by Spencer, feeds the girls’ worry and leads the girls to believe that Jenna is the person pretending to be A, an unknown stalker who is harassing the girls through text and email. Ultimately Spencer, Hanna, Aria, and Emily also suspect Jenna’s involvement in the murder of their friend Ali. Their suspicion pushes their dislike of Jenna over the edge, creating a snowball effect, filled with deceit, plotting, lies, accusations, anger and hate.

3. **Girls gone mean**

In an effort to avoid engaging with Jenna, Emily, Hanna, Aria and Spencer freeze and then turn silent when Jenna is nearby. By staying quiet and motionless the girls believe Jenna will not become aware of their presence. The girls use the hush-and-freeze technique several times throughout the series in their effort to avoid Jenna. This technique is significant for two reasons. The first being, *Pretty Little Liars* demonstrates how young women often resort to this kind of maneuver to avoid direct conflict with one another. This silent treatment between young women is referred to by author Rachel Simmons as indirect aggression. Indirect aggression, according to Simmons, “allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target” (21). She goes on: “For many, the shared knowledge that they are “in a fight” is much easier than actually going to the trouble of having one. Freyda and Lissa’s “fight” may entail passing each

other in the hallway silently for days before anyone speaks...in the silence between them the conflict will swell, taking on a life of its own” (Simmons 75).

The first example of indirect aggression in *Pretty Little Liars* can be witnessed in the opening scene of “The Jenna Thing” (2010) when Jenna enters a restaurant that Hanna, Aria, Spencer, and Emily are sitting in. After Jenna enters, the girls quietly stand up and exit the restaurant, knowing that Jenna cannot see them. Another important component to the hush-and-freeze technique is that this behavior indirectly insults Jenna. This particular behavior is based on an incorrect assumption about Jenna’s disability. The girls’ ignorance regarding their understanding of the experience of blindness continues in the episode “Reality Bites Me” (2010). When Jenna enters an elevator already occupied by a surprised Hanna, Hanna freezes. She stays silent. Hanna assumes that because Jenna is blind she is incapable of knowing Hanna is in the elevator with her. This assumption that a blind person is unaware simply because they cannot see is a misconception many individuals carry when trying to make sense of someone’s experience with blindness. Professor Johnson Cheu articulates this misconception in his essay “Seeing *Blindness* on Screen: The Cinematic Gaze of *Blind Female* Protagonists” (2009), “Blind characters are presumed not able to possess the ability to gaze, or to gaze well enough, and remain the object of the dominant gaze” (487). During this scene in the elevator Jenna counteracts the stereotype of the unaware blind person by catching Hanna off guard as she asks, “Do you like the color [her lipstick]?” With Jenna’s address, Hanna is forced to reveal her presence while recognizing the inaccuracy of her assumption: “Yeah.”

Not only does the audience watch Jenna counter the myths about being blind, but see her participate in an activity specified under girl culture, as she touches up her lipstick. Jenna’s actions no longer make girl culture strictly about the “normal” teen girl experience. Jenna shows

how girl culture is and can become the experience of every teen girl, regardless of their having a disability. Jenna's participation in an activity dominated by nondisabled young women is a tremendous leap forward in teen television, especially when taking into account how girl culture has been a culture that has excluded girls with disabilities (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 9).

While Jenna is a participant of the consumerist part of girl culture, she fortifies her place within girl culture further by practicing another tradition associated with girl culture, aggression. Similar to Alison's clique, Jenna uses other forms of aggression as a means to get what she wants. Shown in a scene between her and Toby in the episode "There's No Place Like Homecoming" (2010), Jenna uses relational aggression as a ploy to keep Toby close. Honoring their routine Toby meets Jenna to assist her around the school premises. As Toby approaches he apologizes for being behind schedule, "Hey. Sorry I'm late." Jenna ignores Toby's apologize and begins to interrogate him. "Were you talking to her? Emily. Why are you doing this?" Confused, Toby asks, "What are you talking about?" Jenna clarifies. "You know you're only fooling yourself, right? I mean once she finds out the truth about you, she'll hate you." Jenna's comment is intended to make Toby rethink his growing friendship with Emily and ultimately to alienate Toby from Emily. Jenna utilizes relational aggression again in the episode "The Bad Seed" (2011). Emily stops by the Cavanaugh's house to see Toby. Upon arrival, Emily finds Jenna sitting in a chair on the front porch. Jenna asks Emily if she's stopped by to visit her or Toby. Emily says she's there to pick up Toby for breakfast. Jenna smiles in response to Emily's answer. She reveals that Toby has already left with *Spencer*. Taking advantage of Emily's silence Jenna rubs the unexpected news in further, "It sucks, doesn't it?" Emily misses Jenna's meaning, "What?" Jenna happily explains, "Feeling like you're second choice." Deciding she has the upper hand Jenna ends the conversation and returns to playing her flute. Emily leaves.

Jenna's behavior toward Emily shows how girls hardly resort to physical violence to solve a fight (Simmons 21). Hanna however proves that there are always exceptions to the rule. In "Someone to Watch Over Me" (2011), Hanna confronts Jenna having Caleb spy on the girls by slapping Jenna hard across the face in the girls bathroom. Jenna's sunglasses fly off of her face and land on the bathroom floor. Slowly, Hanna walks over, picks up Jenna's sunglasses, and then places them into Jenna's hand. "This is Hanna in case you couldn't guess." Another element occurring between the girls, which adds fuel to the fire, is their excellent memory. In addition to social and relational aggression memory plays an instrumental role in how young women treat each other. During "For Whom the Bells Toll" (2011), Jenna counters the girls' accusations and judgment regarding her actions by flipping the power dynamic. "We've all made mistakes. Remember, *I'm still paying for yours.*"

4. **The end of the evil avenger**

A key piece to Jenna's background is her previous intimate relationship with her stepbrother Toby. After the accident, however, the relationship between Jenna and Toby ends. Whether the relationship stopped because of the immorality of it or because of Jenna's ill treatment of Toby is not made clear. It is made clear, however, that Jenna wants Toby back. In the episode "Salt Meets Wound" (2011) Jenna strokes Toby's face and hair. Toby removes Jenna's hand, "I'd still never touch you like that again." In response, Jenna doesn't cry, or beg, and feign weakness at Toby's dismissal of her advancement, as is often portrayed with disabled characters. Professor Colin Barnes and author Geoff Mercer elaborate that characters with disabilities often "appear as criminals, monsters or powerless and pathetic victims" (3). Instead of falling into the typical self-deprecating depiction Jenna responds by slapping Toby across the face in the heat of anger. "Who do you think you're talking to?" Arguably, Jenna's reaction

could position her in the villainous category, which Professor Martin F. Norden describes as the ‘evil avenger’. The ‘evil avenger’ as described by author Alison Harnett is as an individual who wants revenge for the disability or disfigurement that was forced upon him or her (Harnett 21). While Jenna could easily fit into the category of the ‘evil avenger’ given the threats she has made toward Toby and the girls throughout the series, *Pretty Little Liars* portrayal of Jenna’s actions and attitude fit a different category of villain, the mean girl. As a viewer, I translated Jenna slapping Toby as a response to Toby’s efforts to deny Jenna. Jenna’s action shows she will not be thrown to the curb, especially for the girls of Alison’s clique. Despite Jenna’s meanness, her character falls on the opposite spectrum of what Barnes and Mercer articulate as being the common depictions of people with disabilities in mass media. Jenna is confident and persuasive and powerful. In the middle of the episode of “For Whom the Bells Toll” (2011) Jenna tells her boyfriend Garrett, “That video can’t get out. It will destroy us.” Garrett walks over to Jenna saying, “I won’t let that happen,” sealing his promise with a kiss. Later in the episode Jenna reveals her need to control people as she tries to push Spencer aside and away from Toby, “It’s really very nice of you, but I’m here now.”

In “The New Normal” (2011) Jenna is depicted as confident by dressing in lingerie. From the examples regarding Jenna’s character in *Pretty Little Liars* she refuses to allow any one to box her into the expected category of needy, pathetic, or tragic victim.

5. **Conclusion of *Pretty Little Liars***

The show, *Pretty Little Liars*, provides a unique space for the character of Jenna to play within the boundaries of girl culture. At the same time Jenna breaks down the strongest barriers placed between youth and disability. Her character goes against current research on youth with disabilities that concludes that youth with disabilities are unable to access the

consumerist market. In contrast Jenna is shown trying on lingerie in a store and putting on lipstick in the elevator. The character of Jenna also tears down the conclusion that disabled youth, compared to nondisabled youth, are non-existent in activities that are believed to be essential to be considered to be a typical youth. In fact, Jenna participates in a couple of recreational activities. In *Pretty Little Liars* Jenna is shown as proficient in playing the flute. More important, *Pretty Little Liars* goes against the stereotypes of the isolated and tragic disabled teen by creating a romantic plotline between the characters of Jenna and Garrett. Continuing a modern understanding of youth with disabilities the character of Jenna in *Pretty Little Liars* complicates the popular disability stereotype of the “villain”. Jenna Cavanaugh’s use of aggression toward her peers pushes her into a different category of the “villain”, the mean girl. Furthermore, Jenna’s ability to be keenly aware of her environmental surroundings and the people in her life in *Pretty Little Liars* deconstructs some of the most persistent myths about disability, particularly about blindness in television. Similar to *Friday Night Lights* the show *Pretty Little Liars* provides teen audiences with alternative ideas about disability and the outcomes that disability has in the lives of disabled youth.

C. **Yolk: Rebelling Against Asexuality and Claiming Sexuality**

In the previous sections of this chapter I show how the recent television show, *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), and the current teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-Present), challenge familiar stereotypes of disability. In this section, I will demonstrate how the Australian short film, *Yolk* (2007), explores the concepts of disability and sexuality. *Yolk*, directed by Stephan Lance, shows the complexities of growing up as a young woman with an intellectual disability. Director Stephen Lance deconstructs preconceived notions of individuals who have Down syndrome and the ways in which they live their lives. Often young women with

disabilities encounter great difficulty pursuing their right to become their own individuals. This is especially true when young women with disabilities wish to exercise their right to explore and embrace their sexuality. Such rights are difficult to gain as medical anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce explains, “Too often, it is incorrectly assumed that these young people are not or will not become sexually active, use intravenous drugs or be victims of abuse or rape, and so they are not provided basic sex education and the resources to protect themselves” (Groce, 16). Director Stephan Lance however addresses the issue of disability and sexuality head on.

1. **More than an egg**

In the beginning of the film *Yolk* a young woman named Lena, who has Down syndrome, is sitting on a school bus. In the background two boys are laughing. Suddenly one of the boys tosses a folded piece of paper toward Lena. When Lena opens the paper, it reveals a drawing of a penis. Lena looks back at the boy who threw the paper and smiles. Lena folds the paper and places it in her dress pocket. Then she looks at the egg she carries with her, which is used in the film as a metaphor to represent her baby. She warmly tells the egg with a smile on her face, “He’s my boyfriend.” The next day Lena visits the mobile library. During her search Lena finds a book on sex. After looking at a few of the pages, Lena takes the book and exits the library. On her way home, one of the boys from the bus begins taunting Lena. In an act of kindness, the boy who threw the drawing tells his friend to stop teasing her.

Later that night as Lena sets the table for dinner she asks her mother, “What’s it like having a baby? How do they come out?” Instead of engaging Lena in conversation, her mother ignores Lena’s question, correcting the way Lena set the table. Her mother’s disregard of her question about babies is not an uncommon response toward young women with disabilities. Feminist scholar Corbett O’Toole and family counselor Jennifer L. Bregante note that disabled

women are treated as culturally invisible (O'Toole and Bregante 274). Given her mother's reluctance, Lena decides to teach herself about sexuality.

That night when everyone is bed Lena takes the sex book with her to the bathroom. She flips through the pictures, touching the pages. As she looks through the book Lena begins to touch her breast with her other hand. In this scene there is a rising feeling of desire and curiosity coming from Lena. The viewer experiences the sensation of intimacy and understanding. When Lena touches her chest the scene turns slightly erotic. *Yolk* shows Lena as a sexual human being, but doesn't overcompensate. Unlike Becky in *Glee* who becomes "hyper sexualized" in the episode "A Very Glee Christmas" and whose sexuality is treated as a reckless joke, *Yolk* portrays Lena's sexuality as a journey of personal awakening and understanding.

In another scene Lena and the young man from the bus are sitting in the park. The young man addresses Lena, asking, "What's wrong with you?" Despite the abruptness of his question, Lena is not perturbed. She reflects his question back to him. "Nothing. What's wrong with you?" The boy responds with a smile and asks about her egg. She tells him it's a baby. He asks Lena if it's her baby. Lena tells him that it is. Then boy inquires if it would okay if he touches the egg (her baby). Lena grants him permission. As the boy caresses her egg Lena slowly touches his hand and then places her hand over his. For a few moments the boy lets Lena's hand lightly caress his. The boy does not seem scared or uncomfortable, just unsure, and perhaps even nervous. Unexpectedly the boy stands up and walks away without saying a word. This scene between Lena and the boy gives a different feeling than the scene that occurs between Becky and Finn in *Glee*. In *Glee* Finn doesn't hesitate in his decision to kiss Becky on the cheek; it appears to be a preemptive decision on Finn's part. There is no lingering sensation or wonderment behind Becky and Finn's interaction. The environment surrounding Finn and Becky is not intimate as

students stand behind them during their kiss. In the scene between Lena and the boy, however, they are located in a park with nothing but trees surrounding them. Unlike Finn and Becky, Lena and the young man are alone. Another distinction found in *Yolk* is demonstrated when the boy allows Lena to caress his hand before pulling his hand back and leaving. As Lena caresses his hand, the young man's face displays a mix of emotions as he contemplates his feelings toward Lena. The opposite reaction is shown in *Glee* when Finn immediately pulls back from Becky after kissing her on the cheek. Unlike the young man in *Yolk* Finn gives little thought to what his intimate act with Becky could mean.

2. **Reclaiming independence and sexuality**

In the next scene when Lena returns home from the park her mother tells her from now on Lena must come home straight after school. Then she says, "This wasn't on your card." Lena sees the sex book she stole sitting on the kitchen counter, next to her mother. Lena's mother continues, "You stole it and I'm gonna' make you take it back." Lena starts to argue, but her mother cuts her off. In Lena's grasp, the egg breaks. Later Lena's mother knocks on Lena's bedroom door and then enters. Lena is sitting on the edge of her bed holding the pieces of the broken egg in her palm. Lena tells her mother that it is dead. Her mother begins to clean the egg from Lena's hands, telling her, "It's not dead. It wasn't really a baby, anyway. We can just get another one out of the fridge and get rid of this one. No one will know the difference." Her mother replaces Lena's egg. Lena's mother's reaction to the egg shows that her mother fails to see the significance of egg and its importance to Lena. Her mother also fails to recognize and/or embrace her daughter's growing maturity. The next day in the car on the way to the library Lena lets the new egg roll precariously on top of the car dashboard, not caring if it breaks.

Her mother pulls the car over. Lena gets out and walks into the mobile library. A few minutes later Lena returns, she gets back into the car. Lena's mother asks if she returned the book. Lena says she did. As they're driving down the road the viewer is guided by the camera to watch as Lena hugs her chest. Viewers see that Lena has the book hidden under her overalls, out of her mother's line of vision. Despite her mother's wishes, Lena keeps the book. By going against her mother's demand, Lena asserts her right to have autonomy—to make her own decisions. Like Jason Street in *Friday Night Lights* Lena refuses to be guided about how to respond to her body and mind. She will be in control of what happens in her life, no one else. And similar to Jenna in *Pretty Little Liars* Lena is strong. Lena never apologizes or regrets stealing the sex book. Lena will be her own person and follow her own path, regardless of her disability.

3. **Concluding Yolk**

Yolk is a provocative and remarkable film. *Yolk*'s representation of disability and sexuality is honest and accurate. In *Yolk* Lena disrupts the stereotype that people with disabilities are “asexual”, a common stereotype that is still used in the entertainment industry today. In contrast to Becky in *Glee* who is portrayed as insecure and aggressive Lena in *Yolk* is portrayed as a confident and fearless young woman. More importantly Lena's relationship with her sexuality is addressed in a respectful manner. Her character is given room to grow versus Becky who is given very little opportunity to develop. The representation of Lena in *Yolk* follows the path of *Friday Night Lights* and *Pretty Little Liars* who demonstrate a new shift occurring in mass media and its representation of disability. *Yolk* is a rare gem found in the entertainment industry. It is the kind of film that leaves the viewer enlightened and empowered.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Concluding Guys and Dolls: Teens with Disabilities on Television

Today we live in a world where mass media is a dominant source of information. According to feminist speaker Jean Kilbourne during a presentation in 2010 of “Killing Us Softly 4” (40 years after her original work “Killing Us Softly”) she discussed the overwhelming financial power of advertising companies, stating, “It’s an over \$250 billion dollar a year industry, just in the United States” (Kilbourne, Killing Us Softly 4, Youtube). Furthermore, Kilbourne asserted her belief, “I’ve always considered it [advertising] to be a very powerful educational force” (Kilbourne, Killing Us Softly 4, Youtube). Based on Kilbourne’s understanding the entertainment industry is not simply a source of information that we indulge in to entertain ourselves, but is ultimately a source of information we learn from. While this thesis does not attempt to prove that mass media has a direct impact on disabled youth, the teen television shows examined in this work do discuss ideas and themes presented about disability to teen audiences. Thus, this work seeks to demonstrate that mass media has an importance place in the lives of teens with disabilities. Everywhere we turn is a new story or image. As an adult I find mass media easier to tune out. I can pick and choose what I want to look at or read and believe—accept as fact or fiction. But this confidence in navigating through the endless amount of information presented by mass media was not always an easy task.

When I was a little girl growing up with a disability I loved television and film. I loved stories. Most of all I loved the characters I saw and got to know through TV and film. I also enjoyed identifying with their experiences. There was Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) who hardly got to venture outside of her home on her own and wanted a pair of legs so she could see the world. Then there was Shawn from *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000) who grew up in

impoverished living conditions. These were a couple of the many characters I identified with, whose world when I watched them seemed to be an exact replica of my own. Even though I could identify with one or more aspects of these characters' experiences, mostly I daydreamed about sharing their other opportunities. As I grew up, identification with my favorite characters became harder. Shawn got to go to school dances, date, and go to college. Over time his world felt far away and unfamiliar. And Ariel was able to keep her legs and marry the prince. As a child and adolescent in the 1990s and early 2000s mass media told me about the world and how I should be. More specifically, how I should look. While growing up I had never seen someone with a disability who was able to have a fulfilling life unless his or her disability magically went away, like Forrest in *Forest Gump* (1994) or Collin from *The Secret Garden* (1993).

Years later, I did attend middle school dances. I even attended two high school proms. Yet, somehow, I always felt awkward. It didn't matter how beautiful my dress was, how great my hair looked, or how amazing my boyfriend at the time was to me. Today, I believe in my core, I knew the truth. I was out of place. I had been a disabled child/teen living in a nondisabled child/teen world. Most importantly, I grew up with role models who didn't resemble me. Instead I tried to no avail to resemble him or her. There was no one in the entertainment world that I could relate to. This is a common problem, as disability studies scholars Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell point out: "most people make the majority of their life acquaintances with disabled people only in film, television, and literature," (Snyder and Mitchell 181). Given that many people's exposure to disability come from sources of mass media, the entertainment industry must continue to create young characters with disabilities in an effort to eliminate the lingering stereotypes of disabled characters in TV and film.

Furthermore Snyder and Mitchell's belief has a potentially greater impact when taking into account how adolescents are exposed to disability by mass media. In an article titled "The Negative Influence TV Has on Teens" freelance writer Eric Loop writes how a study conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation found that on average, teens between the ages of 8 to 18 watch 4 to 5 hours of television a day. (Loop, "The Negative Influence of TV Has on Teens", Demand Media). This statistic claims that many youth spend at least half of their day watching television. Therefore it is important that the messages portrayed about disability are not based on stereotypes. It is imperative that youth are exposed to a variety of ideas, not just on how they should behave and look, but also about the diverse nature of people. Thus, as the entertainment industry works to include more characters with disabilities in television as this thesis demonstrates, they will also need to continue to incorporate accurate portrayals of disabled characters to introduce viewers to disability.

Since I've grown up I have often wondered if my experience as a child and in particular my experience as a young adult with a disability would have been different if I had been exposed to disabled characters in mass media who I could relate to. While I will never know the answer, I can however speak to the sense of joy and excitement I feel when I watch the characters of Jason Street in *Friday Night Lights*, Jenna Cavanaugh in *Pretty Little Liars*, and Lena in *Yolk*. These characters provide positive, complex, and realistic interpretations of being a youth with a disability. Better yet, the characters of Jason, Jenna, and Lena demonstrate that there is a world full of opportunity and choice for young people with disabilities.

This thesis is a first step in uncovering the important relationship between disabled youth and mass media, but it is simply that, a first step. To better understand the relationship between the entertainment industry and youth with disabilities I leave room for future disability studies

scholars to explore if youth with disabilities are watching representations of disability in their favorite television shows. And if so, to inquire about the response such representation has in their lives and/or their understanding of disability. I also urge future research to be undertaken to study the impact that negative representations of disability can have on disabled adolescent viewers. In this work, I also leave room for further study on disabled young women and their role within girl culture outside of the subject of aggression. It is my hope that this thesis spurs more work to account for the experiences of youth with disabilities, so that they no longer fall through the cracks in disability studies. Perhaps even more significant, I propose that mass media should look to and adopt the disability culture model as their beginning foundation for incorporating disability into storylines featured in television and film. From here, the entertainment industry can begin to explore alternative roles and characterizations for actresses and actors with disabilities, ultimately leading to a partnership that is not built on stereotypes and mistrust, but is a relationship formed out of knowledge and respect.

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VITA

NAME: Jess Amber Tourtellotte

EDUCATION: B.A., Humanities, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington, 2009

M.S., Disability and Human Development, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2015

HONORS: Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship, The Evergreen State College, 2009

PUBLICATIONS: Tourtellotte, Jess: Boundaries of the Disabled Body: Crossing of Reality and Fiction. *The Externalist*. 10, 2008, 8-26.