

***I Am Sam: Portrayal of Disabilities in Popular Film***

Megan Dowdy

Truman State University

## ***Abstract***

The 2001 film *I Am Sam* moves beyond the role of an entertaining flick and into the function of a social discourse on the cultural representation of disability. This paper identifies the medical and social models of disability studies, explains the cultural constructs leading up to these models, and gives examples of how the medical and social models portray disability in film. As a creative work, the aesthetic production elements and the constructed character interactions in the film communicate information that both add to and detract from the dignity of the depiction of disability. The film compares and contrasts the medical and the social models through Rita's and Sam's characterization with the aesthetic use of camera techniques, color palette, lighting, and musical schemes. An analysis of the film concludes that the film's central conflict of the right to guardianship is resolved through the empowerment of the social model.

## ***Introduction***

The film *I Am Sam* is based on themes concerning a mentally challenged father (Sam) in his pursuit to regain custody of his daughter (Lucy.) As a result, it received recognition for its ability to approach the sensitive subject of mental disabilities and parenting. In 2002, the Producers Guild of America presented the producers and directors of the film with the first Stanley Kramer award for their ability to bring awareness to social concerns. (Goodridge, 2002) The presentation of the views expressed in the film can be assessed to determine how the representation of Sam as a disabled person fits within social constructs. Through a cultural studies model, the film's presentation of the disabled can be compared to the use of common cultural perceptions of disabilities.

Simultaneously, the film portrays society's aversion to Sam's disability and Sam's ability to become a hero as he overcomes his challenges in order to become a good parent. The duality of aversion and glorification of disabled people is representative of cultural perceptions. People with disabilities are often viewed as different from the rest of society as a result of their impairments. They can be portrayed negatively as a bother to society. Alternatively, they can be positively visualized as heroes triumphing over obstacles. In the film *I Am Sam*, Sam is portrayed using both positive and negative constructs.

## ***Methodology***

### **Disability Studies Medical and Social Models**

Within media studies, the cultural studies model interprets interdisciplinary texts to reveal constructs present in societies, institutions, and cultures. People with disabilities represent a significant minority in the American population. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 18.7% of America's total population had some sort of disability in 2006. As a result, texts focusing on disability respond to its status as a minority in America. These disability-centered texts use two distinct models to framework arguments: the medical model and the social model.

In both models, the presence of disabilities creates a disturbance in society. However, the models are different because they create different definitions for both the root of the disturbance and society's reaction to the disturbance. In the medical model, societal disturbances are rooted in the physiological or psychological cause of the disability. As a result, disability is viewed as a disease that must be cured. According to editors Ann Pointon and Chris Davies, in the medical model, "it is the impairment that constitutes the disability, made worse or better by the individual's own attitude towards it" (1997, p. 2). In the medical model, the solution for dealing with disability is singular; scientific forces must completely cure all symptoms of abnormality for the disturbance to disappear. Although an individual's attitude can help or harm the situation, the act of being disabled can only be solved through curing the impairment.

Directly related to the medical model is a negative portrayal of people with disabilities. If people with disabilities are not medically able to cure their impairments, then they are perceived as problematic. In film, one such problematic portrayal is the representation of disabled people as monsters, distancing disabled people from the norm of society. This viewpoint conforms to the societal perception that people must change to fit the norm of society, instead of society changing to fit the diversity of people. The viewpoint concludes that if people cannot change to fit society's norm, then they are outcasts. The perception can be traced to Aristotelian beliefs that the state "is founded on the expulsion of these. Others who have no political rights" (Wilson, 2001, p. 14). If institutions are founded for the general public or the norm, and if disabled people are seen as a deviance to the norm, then Aristotelian beliefs imply that deviances should be cast from society.

While Aristotelian beliefs cast disabled people from mainstream society, Christian rhetoric creates a reason for impairments. Christian rhetoric can imply that disabilities are a result of a moral punishment. Within the religious concept of affliction, "the afflicted are cast down by God either as punishment for their sins or as a test to verify their faith" (Wilson, 2001, p. 15) Thus, in media, disabled people are not only portrayed as being cast from society, but they are shown to be evil villains, criminals, or other problematic persons in society. They are associated with the belief that "deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made emblems of evil" (Longmore, 2003, p. 133). In films, they become characterized as villains such as the phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* or Hook in *Peter Pan*.

To contrast the negative attitudes portrayed by the medical model, in the social model, societal disturbances are rooted in the attitudes and institutional structures surrounding

disability. In other words, in the view of the social model, problems are created not by the disability itself, but the society and environment the disability is placed into. As a result, if people with disabilities are unable to medically cure their impairments, then they are not automatically problems or monsters in society. Instead, society's interaction with them determines their societal status.

Unlike the medical model, in the social model, there is no concrete cure for the disability. Instead, the perceptions and resulting institutions are in a constant state of flux. The cultural perception of disability changes as society matures or otherwise transforms. According to editors Pointon and Davies, in the social model, "disability is thus not a fixed condition but a social construct and open to action and modification. One may have an impairment (or 'condition') but in the right setting and with the right aids and attitudes one may not be disabled by it" (1997, p. 2).

The social model can be perceived as a more progressive, modern outlook on disability. The signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush portrayed a shift from a medical to a civil rights-centered, social view on disability. The act helped prevent discrimination in the workplace. While most previous laws defined disabilities through specific medical terms, the Americans with Disabilities Act did not. Instead, the act broadly defined the term 'disability' as: "(a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (b) a record of such impairment; (c) being regarded as having such an impairment" (Riley, 2005, p. 7). The act strove to change society's perspective on disability. Previous to this act, if a person was identified with a disability, he or she was often denied jobs on the basis of having the particular disability.

After the act, society is required by law to accept and make accommodations for such a person in the workplace. Instead of rejecting people as a result of a medical disability, society must transform and enable all people, giving equal opportunities.

Author Charles Riley reflects on the significance of the modern social model to the media's portrayal of disabled people:

For a journalist, this definition is the abracadabra unlocking a vastly broader range of story possibilities, all of which lend greater interest and dignity to people with disabilities profiled because they are suddenly business leaders, artists, teachers, farmers, and real people engaged in the same enjoyable or infuriating activities we all share instead of remaining in the passive position of being patients "for" whom something needs to be done. (2005, p. 7)

Since the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Riley sees a difference in the types of stories documented in journalism. As society makes changes to include disabled people in mainstream activities, the medical condition of the disability is no longer as important. As the environment becomes less disabling, people previously termed as disabled are portrayed in media as enabled.

In an application of cultural studies to film, the social model can evaluate the varying depictions of people with disabilities. The differing cinematic portrayal of disabled people over time reflects society's changes in attitudes and social constructs. According to author Paul Darke, the cinematic attitudes towards disability can be divided into four eras. In the first era, before World War I, cinema portrayed disabilities as freakish. Many actors pretended to have

disabilities in order to play the role of villains in horror films. Darke gives the example of actor Lon Chaney, who often was transformed into deformed villains for roles such as 'Dead Legs' in *West of Zanzibar* and 'the Armless Wonder' in *The Unknown*. (1997, p. 10)

In the second era, occurring after World War II, attitudes surrounding disabilities improved and held a rehabilitative connotation. As a direct response to the returning disabled veterans, many films used plots in which they are able to overcome their hardships. Both *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Pride of the Marines* include plots in which returning veterans must readjust to society after they had been disabled during the war. (p. 11)

Cinematic construction of disabilities returned to a freakish portrayal in the third era in the 1950s. This resurgence of a negative disabled portrayal can be linked to McCarthyism and the House Committee of Un-American Activities. Darke writes that many liberals who had worked for positive representations of disability were forced out of Hollywood. As a result, freakish portrayals of the disabled people became present in the films of the Cold War era. For example, Disney's 1953 production of *Peter Pan* portrayed the one-handed Hook as a villain. (p. 11)

In the last era, the cinema portrays a more enlightened and tolerant view of disability. Reflecting post 1960s values, films began to portray a sense of equality for the disabled. Similar to the rehabilitative Post-War portrayals, films depicted disabled people in their efforts to overcome their challenges and fit in with society. Darke uses examples of films such as *The Elephant Man*, *My Left Foot*, *Passion Fish*, and *The Waterdance*. (p. 13) These films present a sympathetic view towards disability and portray a change in society perspective.

The historical outlook of society's perspective on disability shows a chronology of portrayals from freakish, to rehabilitative, to freakish, to a more enlightened and tolerant viewpoint. Despite this general chronology, stereotypes continue even after a certain era has passed. For example, even though the Cold War era depicting a freakish portrayal has passed, connotations of disabled people as villains still exist in media.

Such stereotypes exist from cultural institutions and perceptions. The stereotype of disabled people as freakish monsters is a result of an unsympathetic society in which institutions are constructed to limit and disable. For example, in *The Phantom of the Opera*, the phantom is represented as a villain with a deformed and scarred face. The presence of deformities on his face does not create cruelty. Since other characters punish his ugliness and cast him away into the depths of an underground cave, he is never shown love. As an outcast, he does not know how to positively react with society, and he becomes a cruel monster. Likewise, the phantom's facial deformities do not limit the phantom's mental capacity or his range of mobility. However, society's lack of compassion disables him from mainstream activities. In turn, the actual presence of the medical impairment did not disable him; society's perception of the medical impairment disabled him.

In contrast, other stereotypes can more positively portray disabled people. The representation of disabled characters as heroes overcoming obstacles fits within a civil rights-centered perspective. As societies accept physical and mental impairments that cause a medical disability, they find ways to enable successes. The concept goes further to imply that if societies allow disabled people to participate in society, then society will benefit from their abilities. One construct that is often used is the idea of compensation. With this idea, "God or nature or life

compensates handicapped people for their loss, and the compensation is spiritual, moral, mental, and emotional” (Longmore, 2003, p. 138). Through a social emphasis of the special abilities given to disabled people, they can be characterized as heroes overcoming obstacles.

Longmore uses an example from the “Town Party, Country Party” (1974) episode of the television series *Little House on the Prairie* about a “lame” schoolgirl. In episode, “Charles, the father, says that many ‘cripples’ seem to have ‘special gifts.’ Laura, his daughter, asks if those gifts include ‘gumption.’ Yes, he answers, and goodness of heart too” (Longmore, 2003, p. 138).

Films often use the stereotype of compensation when portraying disabled people who can positively interact with society. In the 1988 film *Rain Man*, the selfish Charlie Babbit meets Raymond, the autistic brother he did not know he had. Throughout the film, Charlie learns to appreciate the emotional gifts of his brother and learns to turn from his selfish ways and learn to love.

In the past, the portrayal of disabled people was largely limited to a medical model in which the presence of an impairment forever caused a disability and limited the individual. In moving to a social model, disabled people can overcome their impairments and participate in society. The depiction of disabled characters can be evaluated through a use of both the medical and social models, specifically through character portrayals and character interactions. In the film, character interactions represent society’s perception of disability. Using the medical model, interactions that limit Sam to his medical capabilities portray him as a monster-like problem for society. In contrast, using the social model, interactions that create a place for Sam in society allow him to compensate for his disability. By categorizing character interactions, the cinematic viewpoint on disability is discovered.

## **Aesthetic Critical Model**

In addition to character interactions, the creators of the film were able to create an “accessible and elevating” (Goodridge, 2002) piece through their ability to use production elements to deepen the character development. Through the creative expression of Sam and Rita’s characterization, information regarding the medical and social models towards disability is revealed. As the film progresses, the filming style reflects a gradual shift so that by the end of the film, the social model is favored over the medical model. Specifically, the creative expression of these personalities results from the intentional filming characteristics of each character’s perspective, the unique musical schemes for both Sam and Rita, the types of light present when each character is with his or her child, and each character’s color palette.

The authors Silverblatt, Ferry, and Finan provide a specific guide to the aesthetic criticism of production elements that can be used in an evaluation of the film *I Am Sam*. An aesthetic criticism of production elements interprets the function of creative elements in a work of media. Specifically, the aesthetic criticism model explains “the way in which the audience receives the information, the emphasis or interpretation placed on the information by the media communicator, [and] the reaction of the audience to the information” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 196). Through an analysis of the creative elements of the film, greater, deeper meaning is discovered.

One creative element utilized is perspective and point of view. According to Silverblatt, Ferry, and Finan, “the point of view (POV) informs the audience who is telling the story” (1999, p. 206). In first person point of view, the story is told from one character’s perspective. The

camera shot known as the POV is one method to establish a first person point of view. In this shot, a character reveals his inner mental state as the camera zooms into a close up of a character, followed by a dream sequence, flashback, memory, or inter-subjective reasoning. (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 206) Second person perspective “makes the viewer the primary participant in the story” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 206). As a participant in the story, the audience views the film as if they were characters in the set. They do not simply view the action, but they become a part of the action. Third person perspective expresses the personality of the camera. In this point of view, “the media communicator follows the thoughts and activities of one character but retains some critical distance and is therefore not responsible for the behavior of the character” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 206). In third person perspective, the audience views the scene from the producer’s creative point of view. Finally, an omniscient point of view allows for the representation of several characters at one time. An omniscient perspective “offers the audience a comprehensive exposure to people and events depicted in the work” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 207). In an omniscient point of view, the audience is able to know more than the characters, and the viewer can assess the scene from an outside, all-knowing perspective.

Sound also helps create meaning through both objective context and subjective emotional implications. While dialogue is structured to sound like conversation, it is rich with hidden, unspoken meaning. Background sound adds realism to events, such as in the case of literal sounds, which are sounds normally heard in a specific setting. Other background sound, such as nonliteral sounds, “are not source-connected but instead support the image by adding meaning and emotional energy to an on-screen event” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 239).

These nonliteral sounds help intensify moods or explain what a character is thinking. Like these sounds, music can also “unlock emotion,” inform the audience about how to feel, or bring the scene into a particular historical, cultural or ethnic context (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 239). For example, a thriller often foreshadows suspense through the inclusion of foreboding, mysterious music. To contrast, romantic comedies often use light, happy music to intensify the audience feelings about the unification of a couple.

Lighting is another creative element used to produce meaning for viewers of media productions. It can be used to highlight particular focal points in a scene or intensify moods. Ferry, Finan, and Silverblatt use the example of lighting in the 1995 film, *Bridges of Madison County*. In the film, “the soft overhead lighting in Francesca’s (Meryl Streep) kitchen creates a warm lush atmosphere that lends romance to the slow dance between Francesca and Kincaid (Clint Eastwood)” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 226).

Films also use specific colors to elicit premeditated emotional responses from the viewer. Psychological studies show that colors associate with particular meanings or feelings in a particular culture. For example in Western cultures, blues represent “trust, sensitivity, loyalty, nurturance, piety, and sincerity” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 224). To contrast, reds can represent “impulse and intensity, blood and sexuality, youthfulness and forcefulness” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 224). Color can portray themes and set the tone and mood of a media production. For example, warm colors can portray energy while cool colors can portray peace and quiet. Although studies can show that colors often associate with particular meanings, the context of the color’s use ultimately defines its meaning. Ferry, Finan, and Silverblatt use the example of the use of color in the 1997 sci-fi horror film *Event Horizon*. While the color green is

often associated with calm feelings, the cinematographer of the film uses green to produce the “nasty horrible green you get from fluorescence when it’s not corrected” (Ferry, Finan & Silverblatt, 1999, p. 224).

Through the aesthetic criticism model, the creative use of sensory elements generates meaning and emotional value. By using this model for the film *I am Sam*, creative elements can be studied to discover further meaning behind the character development of Sam Dawson and Rita. By uncovering a deeper meaning, the characters become more than just a lawyer and client. Instead, they become a portrayal of humans with weaknesses. They become humans on a journey to overcome weaknesses in an effort to better participants in society. In terms of disability studies, if the person with the disability is physically unable to interact in society, the character portrayal shows the medical model. If the person is viewed as enabled in society, the character portrayal shows the social model.

The film *I Am Sam* presents varying portrayals of disabilities. An underlying conflict in the film is differing viewpoints as some characters see through the lens of the medical model and some react through the lens of the social model. As Sam struggles to win legal guardianship over his daughter, the authorities such as the school district, the Department of Child and Family Services, and the prosecuting attorney believe that the presence of his medical disability negates his ability to parent. In contrast, other characters such as Sam’s friends and eventually his lawyer believe that Sam’s other characteristics allow him to compensate for his disability and make him an excellent candidate for a father. Through the struggles and triumphs in *I Am Sam*, the social model enables Sam and is presented as the preferred method of portraying disabilities.

## ***Medical Model Portrayals***

Throughout the film, Sam and his friends are aware of negative connotations given to them as a result of their medical disabilities. At one point of the film, they painstakingly try to mask their disabilities. When Sam attempts to set up his new answering machine, he wants his voice to sound like a good father. With the help of his friends, Sam decides that in order to sound like a good father, he must sound like he does not have any disabilities. In the words of his friend Brad, Sam must try to “sound like a normal person.” (Nelson, 2001) Instead of being identified as by his disability, Sam wants to be identified by society as a caring father.

In fact, it is the presence of Sam’s medical disabilities that cause authorities to question Sam’s ability to parent Lucy. Sam was first told that he was incapable of being a good father in a parent/teacher meeting. In this meeting, Lucy’s teachers explain that the presence of Sam’s medical disability limited Lucy’s future abilities. They reason that, “No one doubts that you love your daughter. But the Department of Child and Family Services contacted us and shared with us that your intellectual capacity is around that of a seven-year-old. Our concern is what happens when Lucy turns eight.” (Nelson, 2001) The school does not seek a solution to strengthen Sam’s ability to be a good father. Instead, they singularly conclude that Sam should not be Lucy’s father as a result of his disability.

In the court case against Sam’s guardianship of Lucy, the prosecuting attorney Mr. Turner bases his entire case on the medical model. His witnesses include a shrink who explains Sam’s mental inability to adequately parent Lucy. With every one of Rita’s witnesses, Mr. Turner turns the argument around to capitalize on the fact that Sam’s mental capacity is that of a child

and is, therefore, unable to parent a child. For example, when Sam's work manager explains Sam's work responsibilities, Mr. Turner highlights that the described responsibilities are very limited and reflects Sam's limited seven-year-old mental capacity. This quantifiable mental capacity becomes the primary decision-making factor in Mr. Turner's mind.

As a secondary motive of Mr. Turner's prosecution, Sam is depicted with the stereotype of being an evil sinner. In his efforts to define Sam by his disability, he attempts to depict Sam as too mentally immature to know between right and wrong, recalling the biblical connotation that people with disabilities are sinners. First, Mr. Turner exaggerates what happened at Lucy's birthday, saying that Sam hit a child when he only was "heavy-handed" with him. Mr. Turner tries to illustrate Sam as violent, when in reality Sam is extremely sensitive to people's feelings. For example, when Rita upsets one of Mr. Turner's witnesses on stand, Sam becomes also becomes upset. He points out that it is unkind that Rita made the witness cry. Other ways in which Mr. Turner tries to corrupt Sam's image includes the reference of the situation surrounding Lucy's conception. When Sam justifies his argument with the fact that he is Lucy's biological father, Mr. Turner responds, "Are you really? I'm not talking about whether or not you got some homeless woman pregnant." (Nelson, 2001) In doing so, he makes the connotation that Sam is immoral. However, at many times in the film, Sam makes references to his high regard for strong morals. Examples include reprimanding Lucy for lying and repeatedly refusing to bend the truth for Rita.

## **Perspective**

In *I Am Sam*, aesthetic elements create meaning and character development. Specifically, the aesthetic element of perspective presents character's ways of seeing the world. Through camera shots, angle, framing, and a description of what the viewer sees in the screen, the viewer is able to understand characters' perspectives. Sam's perspective shows the medical model at key moments in the film.

Sam shows the medical model when he physically distances himself from society. When Sam loses hope and believes that he will never regain custody of his daughter, he builds a wall of origami, separating himself from others that enter the room. Sam explains to Rita why he creates the barrier:

Sam: There is no room here. Because I make things hard on everyone.

Rita: You have to let me in, please.

Sam: But Lucy doesn't need me anymore... You don't know what it's like when you try, and you try, and you try, and you don't ever get there. Because you were born perfect, and I was born like this, and you are perfect. People like you don't know what it is like to get hurt-ed. Because people like you don't have feelings. (Nelson, 2001)

Sam explains that he wants to become an outcast because his disability causes him to cause problems for others. As a result of his identification with his disability, he does not see his societal value and instead views himself as not perfect and against the Aristotelian norm. Previously, he felt that his value in society was to be Lucy's father. Since Lucy was taken away from him, he no longer sees his societal worth and instead, only sees his medical flaws. As a perceived threat to society, he thinks he must remove himself from society.

Characters' viewpoints of Sam change throughout the film, which is reflected through the change in Rita's perspective from the medical model to the social model. The film references the medical model through the equation of Sam to his disability. The problem of defining Sam solely in terms of his disability is referenced through dialogue between Sam and his lawyer Rita:

Rita: I need people to testify that you are a good father despite your handicap. I didn't mean your handicap. I meant your disability. I mean the fact that you are retarded. That's not right either. I don't know what to call you.

Sam: Sam. You can call me Sam. (Nelson, 2001)

At this point in Sam and Rita's relationship, Rita is unable to look past the fact that Sam was disabled. However, Sam does want to be defined in terms of his medical impairment. Instead, he wants to be identified as himself.

## **Sound**

Sam's score is established early in the film as an upbeat percussion. However, when Sam is forced to change the rhythm of his life, his medical disabilities prevent him from understanding the changes, and the rhythm of his score changes as well. When Lucy is born, and Sam leaves work early to go to the hospital, Sam changes his schedule. His percussion-driven score becomes rushed, mimicking his panicked, stressful state of mind. Likewise, when police take him away from Lucy's birthday party, the percussion is hurried and frantic. When Sam's percussion is fast-paced, Sam is in such a nervous state that he is unable to provide unrivaled attention to his daughter. His medical disabilities prevent him from being able to completely comprehend the changes that are going on in his life. In the medical perspective, the presence of his disability causes a loss of control, and is unable to positively interact with society.

## **Lighting**

The aesthetic element of lighting is used to indicate Sam's levels of contentment. Sam's lighting is consistently cool when his medical disability prevents him from forming relationships with people. Lighting is cold and florescent when Lucy's teachers tell him that she is falling behind in school due to his mental capacity of a seven-year-old, and when Rita initially declines helping him as a result of his "situation." Sam is unhappy when people deny relationships with him. Sam is especially unhappy when he is forced to sever his relationship with his daughter. When he talks to a psychologist about his ability to parent Lucy, waits during custody court proceedings, or visits Lucy during monitored child visits, the lighting is so cold that it appears blue. When Sam is at his saddest, his relationship with his daughter is being torn apart.

## **Color**

At the beginning of the film, blue is established as both Sam and Rita's signature color. The events of the film introduce red into their color palettes, portraying character development. In the beginning of the film, blue is linked to Sam through his environment. While blue is Sam's signature color and the color of his favorite restaurant, IHOP, it is also a symbol of his identity of having a medical disability. Confused and dazed, when Sam goes to the hospital to see Lucy for the first time, the walls are a vibrant blue. When Lucy's teacher meets with Sam to tell him that he is an unsatisfactory father, the school has blue walls. Sam struggles to read to Lucy on a blue couch. The courtroom has an overall bluish cast when the judge tells Sam that Lucy will be taken from him. Whenever the medical model plays a role in telling Sam that his disability causes him to be inadequate, the color blue is overwhelmingly present.

Like Sam, Rita is introduced through the color blue. The walls of her office are a deep blue. Her house is also a similar shade of blue. During these scenes with blue, Rita's focus of attention constantly shifts from other people in society and back to her work. In these scenes, Rita sees Sam through the medical model. He is simply a pro-bono situation with no personal value to her. When she sees Sam through her blue lens, she is unable to listen to Sam as a fellow human being and cannot value his opinion.

### ***Social Model Portrayals***

Very different from the medical model used in Mr. Turner's defense, Rita uses the social model to portray Sam as a good father to Lucy. Instead of focusing on Sam's medical ailments, Rita focuses on the functionality of the society around Sam. She leads her arguments to the point that Sam is a loving father, and with a proper support system, he is capable of parenting Lucy.

Her positioning is exhibited by the following conversation:

Mr. Turner: We are talking about entrusting an eight-year-old in the hands of someone whose records show that he has been diagnosed with autistic tendencies, mental retardation, and is incapable ...

Rita: One's mental capacity has no bearing on one's ability to love ... The relevancy is that every parent has a right to a support system. (Nelson, 2001)

In her rebuttal to Mr. Turner, Rita uses the idea that Sam's identity is more than an association of his disability. Instead, Sam is a valuable portion of Lucy's life and can give her love. Rita believes that with the help of society, represented by a support system, Sam can give Lucy everything that she needs. For example, Rita suggests that Sam can overcome his inability to

help Lucy with geometry homework by using available resources and bringing her to free tutoring sessions at the YWCA.

In the film, Sam is portrayed beyond his disability is through the method of compensation. Although Sam is unable to overcome the presence of his actual, medical disability, he is able to overcome the terminal impact of the disability. In the medical model, if the disability is not be cured, then the person with disabilities becomes considerably less valuable to society. Using the compensation method of the social model, even though Sam cannot be cured of his medical disability, he is able to compensate with other gifts to remain valuable to society.

The idea of compensation is explored early in the film through a conversation between Sam and Lucy. In the conversation, Lucy tries to sort out why her father is the way he is:

Lucy: Daddy, did God make you like this, or is this an accident?

Sam: What do you mean?

Lucy: I mean you are different.

Sam: What do you mean?

Lucy: You are not like other daddies.

Sam: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Yeah, I'm sorry.

Lucy: It's okay, daddy. It's okay. Don't be sorry. I'm lucky. No one else's daddy comes to the park.

Sam: Yeah. Yeah. We are lucky. Aren't we lucky? (Nelson, 2001)

Early in the film, Lucy makes the conclusion that she is accepting of his disabilities because Sam compensates for them. Lucy views Sam as a good father because he takes the time to be with her. Lucy realizes that her father is medically different than other fathers and has the intellectual capacity of a seven-year-old. However, as a six-year-old herself, she feels that her father understands her and can play with her as a child. Lucy feels that Sam's childlike mentality makes him a more involved parent.

Later in the film, Sam's neighbor Annie makes a similar conclusion about Sam. When Rita questions Annie about Sam's ability as a father, Annie responds:

Look at Lucy. She is strong. She displays true empathy for people. All kinds of people. I know that you all think that she is as smart as she is despite him but it is because of him. (Nelson, 2001)

Annie explains that Sam is able to compensate for his disabilities because he is a compassionate role model for Lucy. She states that Sam is a positive influence to Lucy because he teaches her to love, which, in her opinion, is the most important lesson a parent can teach.

### **Perspective**

In contrast with elements of the medical model that emphasize Sam's disability, elements of the social model are evidenced through a depiction of a Sam that is enabled. In the social model, Sam is not identified by his disability but by who he is outside of his disability. In the opening of the movie, the social model is introduced through Sam's perspective. Through shots that show only Sam's hands sorting sugar packets and preparing for Starbucks to open, the opening first introduces Sam as a working member of society. Only later the camera zooms out and viewers realize that Sam has a disability.

In keeping with the limitations presented by the medical model, the identification of Sam with his disabilities leads to stereotypical portrayals of him as a grotesque monster, a cruel villain, and a social outcast. Although Sam is not portrayed as freakish as characters such as the phantom in the *Phantom of the Opera*, he is characterized in terms that reflect that he is an undesirable monster. Before Rita befriends Sam, she medically identifies him in terms of his disability. As a result, in her eyes, he is untouchable. After she tells Sam that she will be his lawyer, he enthusiastically embraces her in hug. In response, she looks disgusted. Afterwards, she even wipes her hands off, reflecting that something about Sam was grotesque and monster-like. Rita is only able to touch Sam (to help him put on a tie) after she begins to appreciate him for his kindness. She is able to initiate a hug only after she begins to appreciate Sam for his friendship. In Rita's perspective, Sam loses his grotesqueness once she is able to identify him as Sam and not with his disability.

Rita's perspective changes so that she is able to see Sam through the social model. Near the end of the film, when Sam creates the origami barrier, Rita responds by staring through an opening in the wall of origami so that she only sees an extreme close up of Sam. Through her perspective, Sam's eyes and nose take up the entire screen. Rita's focus is able to zoom in to Sam, similar to the way in which Sam's focus was able to zoom in to his sugar packets. By focusing on only his eyes and nose, Rita does not focus on Sam's medical disabilities. Instead, she is focusing on him as a human being. By focusing on what she refers to as his "kind, caring eyes," Rita's perspective is able to see Sam for the value of kindness that he brings to society. As a result, his medical disabilities take a back seat.

## Sound

The aesthetic element of sound is used to portray the tempo of Sam and Rita's lives. Throughout the course of the film, the characters' lives change as they struggle to gain Sam's guardianship of Lucy in spite of Sam's disability. The transforming tempo in the film's score depicts character responses to life events. The opening sugar packet scene introduces the initial tempo of Sam's life. As rhythmic percussion accompanied by a wind instrument, the simple, upbeat rhythm accentuates the methodic way in which Sam lives his life. At the beginning of the film, Sam has a scheduled rhythm in his life; he works during the days, eats at IHOP on Wednesday nights, and then has movie nights with his friends. The slow, upbeat tempo of the score reflects Sam's ability to take control over life events and positively interact in society.

Similar to Sam, Rita is also introduced with a percussion-based score. However, while Sam's initial score is slow, repetitive, and upbeat, Rita's is fast, nervous, and edgy. Her score reflects her distraught life, her tendency to always be behind, and her inability to take the time to appreciate the small details in her life. In the film, she is stressed from not having enough time to get to a client meeting, talk to her son on the phone. Another scene uses the edgy score as she runs up twenty-nine flights of stairs since she does not have time to work out. The fast tempo of her initial score reflects the rushed, stressful quality of her life. As it quickly switches between different types of percussion-based sounds, it reflects her tendency to half-heartedly try to accomplish everything at once. Through this fast-paced percussion, we hear Rita as she is unable to slow down enough to talk to her son on the phone. She is unable to take the time to have a relationship with him, which affects her interactions with others in society.

Both Sam and Rita exhibit fast-paced scores at times in the movie when they are at their lowest. For Sam, the fast-paced scores result from schedule-changing situations. For Rita, the score reflects her stressful lifestyle. Together, they are able to slow down each other's tempo, helping them interact better in society. On the day that Sam is supposed to testify in court, he leaves his job at Starbucks early. Changing his schedule, Sam becomes frazzled and stressed, and his score is fast-paced and frantic. As he runs into the courtroom, Rita speaks with him, saying "Sam, look at me. Slow down. Lucy needs you." At once, his fast-paced score was replaced with the quiet, ambient sound of the courtroom. He is able to slow down and be present for Lucy. Acknowledged by the change in sound, as Rita calms Sam, and he is able to overcome his medical disabilities to a degree that he can function in society.

Using the compensation method of the social model, as Sam enters Rita's life, his positive personality qualities influence her to slow down her lifestyle. At their first meeting at Rita's office, Rita's fast paced-score blocks out portions of Sam's speech. Although she sits across the desk from Sam, Rita cannot effectively hear Sam's conversation. To contrast, in a much later scene, Rita is sitting across a table from Sam at IHOP. Rita's faced-paced score is replaced with ambient noises of the restaurant. She actually listens to Sam and actively participates in a conversation. Sam comments, "You are eating slower; that is good." They continue to have a conversation about personal aspects of their family life and the status of Rita's marriage. Rita does not block out Sam's suggestions, but responds to them. Rita's ability to slow down and listen to Sam portrays a shift. As Rita learns from Sam to slow down, Rita learns to appreciate Sam's value as a human being. Drawn to respect him, Rita exhibits qualities of the social model.

## **Lighting**

In contrast of the cool lighting portrayed by the medical model, lighting is warm when society allows Sam to establish relationships with people. Whether Sam converses with customers at Starbucks, jokes with his friends, or visits with Annie, the lighting is a warm and tungsten. When establishing meaningful relationships, Sam is truly happy. The lighting intensifies when Sam spends quality time with Lucy. When he is swinging, reading, or laying in the grass with her, the lighting is so warm that it appears yellow. When Sam is at his happiest when he is forming a father-daughter relationship with Lucy.

## **Color**

As both Sam and Rita gain awareness of how to better function in society, contrasting colors unify to create harmony. For Sam, red becomes a symbol of the social model by the means of a support system to help him raise Lucy. Early in the movie, red tones are introduced through the environment of Annie, an older neighbor who watches Lucy when Sam goes to work. By the end of the film, Sam expands his support system to let him adequately parent Lucy's growing needs. He learns to seek outside help. He needs a harmony of red and blue.

Red is linked to an external support system through the portrayal of Randy, Lucy's court appointed foster mother. Without Sam's mental disabilities, Randy is able to provide Lucy with elements of a "normal" childhood, such as knowing to take her to sell Girl Scout cookies. Randy is introduced to us in a red dress with white polka dots. As Lucy lives with Randy, Lucy begins to emulate Randy. Lucy begins to wear red. At one point, Lucy wears a red and white polka-dotted

hoodie when she sides with Randy and is upset with her father. Although Lucy loves Sam, she also looks up to Randy as a mother figure and begins to imitate her.

In a scene before the final court proceeding, Sam and Randy stand at the threshold of his apartment door. The room on Sam's side of the door is painted a rich blue. The hallway on Randy's side of the door is painted a vibrant red. As Randy gives Lucy back, Sam explains that even though he wants to be Lucy's guardian, he needs help. He implores, "Because I always wanted Lucy to have a mother. I always wanted her to have a mother. And I hope I meet somebody, not just anyone. And you are the red in her painting. Because I think you are the red in her painting." Sam accepts that his medical disability causes parenting issues, and that for him to properly function as a parent in society, Lucy needs an external support system; Sam accepts that Lucy needs red in her life.

The closing scene of the film expresses a harmony of Sam's guardianship of Lucy and support of outside help, a harmony of blue and red. In a soccer game against a red and a blue team, Lucy is on the blue team, portraying Sam's guardianship. As part of her support system, the red-wearing Randy cheers Lucy as she scores a goal. Through the inclusion of the color red, Sam's character is able to accept colors beyond his comfortable blue color. Sam is able to seek help of the outside society.

The color red is used with Rita to show her acceptance of Sam's place in society. It is first seen with Rita when Sam asks Rita about her relationship with Willy. Using the background of a vibrant red wall, Rita stops and considers her relationship with her son. With Sam's help, she realizes that her son would like to have a closer relationship with her; however, Rita must put

effort into creating the relationship. When Rita takes a step towards the relationship, red is utilized. Through the use of red sheets, Rita's bedroom scene with her sleeping son portrays Rita focusing on the love she feels for her son. Finally, at the end of the film, Rita comfortably sits next to Willy in the stands at Lucy's soccer game. The harmony of blue and red is established as Rita wears blue and Willy wears red. Through a realization of the social model, Rita is able to value Sam's societal contributions, take his advice, and change her lifestyle for the better. Through the compensation model, in trying to help Sam regain guardianship of Lucy, Sam's ability to love Lucy influenced her to become a better parent.

## ***Conclusion***

At the resolution of the film, the social model prevails over the medical model. Characters representing the social model, such as Rita, win the court case from characters representing the medical model, such as Mr. Turner. In the closing scene, Sam is refereeing Lucy's soccer game, symbolizing his winning the custody case, thus remaining an authority figure in Lucy's life. Symbols of Lucy's support system are cheering her on, including Sam's friends, Rita and her son, and Lucy's previous foster parents from the trial. Sam is still as medically disabled as when Lucy is initially taken from him. However, Sam is socially enabled. The conflict is resolved because other characters have stepped forward to help Sam succeed as a father. As a support system, they will positively supplement Sam's abilities to provide Lucy with additional resources.

As a result, the identification of Sam through the medical model becomes a central conflict for Sam as he seeks reunification with his daughter. The production elements of perspective, sound, lighting, and color are used to draw attention to the issues caused by the utilization of the medical model and the solutions formed by the use of the social model. Through a careful analysis of the production elements surrounding the characterization of Sam and Rita, the social model becomes a method of empowerment for Sam.

In reference to the title, *I Am Sam*, by the end of the film, through both character interactions and production elements, Sam is identified by himself and not by his medical problems. Through the social model, he is portrayed as an asset to society and a positive, loving influence for Lucy. By using the social model to resolve the conflict of Sam's right to guardianship over his daughter, the film portrays the social model as the preferred method of viewing people with disabilities. Through the social model, Sam's disabilities are converted from disturbances into opportunities for compensation. Once Sam is reinforced by society by the means of his support system, Sam's story becomes a tale about the transformation from disability to enablement.

## ***Annotated Bibliography***

Darke, P. (1997). Everywhere: Disability on film. In Pointon, A. and Davies, C. (Ed.), *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media*. (p. 10-14). London: British Film Institute.

The article is part of a larger body of work that was written in an effort to end misconceptions of disabled people in media. At the time of publication, the author was finishing his Ph.D. on “Representations of Disability in Post-War British Films’ at the University of Warwick. He has experience writing on the portrayal of disability in films in publications such as *DAM*, *Link* magazine, and *Disability and Society*. In addition, he has had experience as a consultant, contributor and jury member at numerous disability film festivals in Europe. While he writes from a British example, he uses many American films and examples, keeping his views relevant.

Ferry, J., Finan, B., & Silverblatt, A. (1999). *Approaches to media literacy*. New York: M.E.

Sharpe.

The text explains different methods of approaching media. In Chapter Five, “Analysis of Productions Elements,” the authors define aesthetic elements, such as editing, composition, perspective, angle, connotation, graphics, color, lighting, shape, movement, scale, sound, and special effects. Through examples of the use of these elements in media texts, the authors explain the implications of the aesthetic elements.

Longmore, P. (2003) Screening stereotypes: Images of disabled people in television and motion pictures. In *Why I Burned my Book and Other Essays on Disability*. (p. 131-148)  
Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

As a Professor of History at San Francisco State University, the author provides a historical look at disabilities in American culture. Specifically, the essay explains historical reasoning for stereotypes of disability in media texts. As co-editor of the text *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, the author has had previous experience with the genre of disability studies.

Nelson, J. (Director). (2001). *I am Sam* [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Productions, Inc.

The film was created as drama telling the story of a handicapped father Sam in his quest to regain the custody of his daughter Lucy. The film explores themes of parenting as Sam's ability to father his daughter is questioned.

Pointon, A. and Davies, C. (Ed.), *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media*. London: British Film Institute.

The editors of the text are experienced and capable of evaluating media dealing with themes of disability. Ann Pointon is a freelance producer/ director and disability consultant who has worked for BBC and Channel Four Television. Chris Davies is a

freelance producer, disability consultant and writer, and television reviewer for *Disability Now*. The text was written for students and users of film and television to teach methods of critique and analysis for texts dealing with disability. The intent is to end negative portrayals of disability. Although the text is written to a British audience, the editors recognize that disability in American media studies are more developed than in Britain. (p. 1) Since the text often draws upon American media studies, the text is an appropriate source for American disability portrayals in film.

Goodridge, Mike. (2002, February 1). "I Am Sam producers win Stanley Kramer PGA prize."

Retrieved November 3, 2009, from *Screen Daily* website:

<http://www.screendaily.com/i-am-sam-producers-win-stanley-kramer-pga-prize/408188.article>

The *Screen Daily* website provides film industry news specifically from the UK, the US, Europe, and Asia. Goodridge's article informs readers that *I Am Sam* won the first Stanley Kramer PGA prize for its high quality production of a film dealing with social issues. As an international website for those in the film industry, the source is relevant because it gives the film international recognition.

Riley, C. (2005). *Disability and the media: Prescriptions for change*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Riley's book writes about the media's common stereotypes about disabilities. Written for an audience of media writers and producers, the text tries to end the creation of inaccurate, cliché preconceptions about disability. The author is a professor of journalism at Baruch College in New York. He is also co-founder of WeMedia, the first multimedia company devoted to people with disabilities. Through his experiences, he is an appropriate author to write about the portrayal of disability in the media.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. (2008, December).

*Americans with Disabilities: 2005, Household economic studies*. Retrieved December 1, 2009, from the U.S. Census Bureau's website:

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p70-117.pdf>

The U.S. Department of Commerce gives official, unbiased statistics about the prevalence of disability in America. The information available in the text gives a factual basis upon which a social structure can be built. The text states that 18.7% of Americans have disabilities. As a result, disabled people form a large minority in America. The portrayal of disabled people as a minority deserves cultural analysis.

Wilson, J. and Lewiecki-Wilson, C. (2001). Disability, rhetoric, and the body. In Wilson, J. and Lewiecki-Wilson, C. (Ed.) *Embodied rhetorics: Disability in language and culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

The book examines the rhetoric concerning the topic of the disabled in the context of social conditions, education, literature, and mass media. The editors of the text are credible of writing the text as they are professors at the college level. Significant about their work is that they are also parents to a disabled son. With both academic and personal backgrounds, they provide insightful information about the role of disability in reference to both the body and to rhetoric. The principal ideas concerning the portrayal of the disabled can serve as an assessment model for *I Am Sam*. By comparing the portrayal of Sam to the typical portrayal of the disabled as outlined in the text, the film can be critically analyzed.