BEYOND THE SURFACE: ANALYZING DEFORMITIES AS CATALYSTS FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN PETER CAREY'S *THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF TRISTAN SMITH*

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Abstract: Physical deformities portrayed in literature offer an insight into the more profound understanding of the character's psyche. Characters with deformities provide a lens through which the authors explore the full spectrum of human experiences. By delving into their struggles, triumphs, and personal growth, readers better understand human emotions and challenges. Analyzing the significant aspects of deformities that incite character development is crucial for understanding the characters' motivations. This paper supposes deformities as catalysts in character development and analyses Carey's portrayal of Tristan Smith on par with the supposition. It is done with a special focus on Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's Coping theory, known as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. A renowned Australian writer, Peter Carey is known for creating effervescent characters. In the novel The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith, he allows readers to explore Tristan Smith's interior life. Born a deformed child, Tristan develops unique perspectives, strengths, and coping mechanisms. His journey fosters personal growth and resilience, ultimately transforming his identity and outlook. Studies on such characters offer scope for inspiring readers to overcome setbacks and challenges. This paper highlights Tristan's deformities and further posits them as catalysts in developing his character.

Strength doesn't come from what you can do.
It comes from overcoming the things you once thought you couldn't.
--Rikki Rogers [1]

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on understanding and critically examining the experiences, representations, and societal implications of disabilities. The application of disability studies in literary analysis involves an examination of deformities portrayed in literature. The portrayals of deformities often leave a trace of societal attitudes towards the deformed characters. Hence, the implications of such deformities directly influence character development. Analysing Carey's novel from this perspective provides relevant ideas on how deformities shape characters' experiences, relationships, and personal growth. It also considers the broader societal implications of these portrayals.

Analyzing deformities as catalysts for character development is a thought-provoking idea that suggests a deep exploration of how physical deformities in literature contribute to characters' growth and transformation. This research further delves into the psychological, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of the characters' experiences with deformities. Characters with deformities provide a lens through which the authors explore the full spectrum of human experiences. By delving into their struggles, triumphs, and personal growth, readers better understand human emotions and challenges.

Peter Philip Carey, an outstanding Australian writer is known for conveying distinct perspectives through his works. He is highly acclaimed for winning the Booker Prize twice. He has tried his hand at crafting intricate characters. Thomas Keneally, one of the best writers in Australia, considers Carey as "One of the great figures on the cusp of the millennium"

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(*Unusual Life*). Carey's narratives involve characters that are idiosyncratic and flawed. In the novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, Tristan Smith is one of Carey's unique creations. The plot revolves around Tristan, who is physically deformed by birth. The narrative underscores how his deformities help him develop his character over time.

The novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is a remarkable work that portrays the life of a physically deformed boy named Tristan. This novel stands out for its intellectually stimulating concepts that make the narrative quite appealing. As praised by Brad Hooper, "Tristan Smith's unusual life makes for an unusual novel…. Alternately funny and poignant, a picaresque novel that avid fiction readers will devour" (*Unusual Life*). The narrative takes place in two distinct fictional countries created by Carey named Efica and Voorstand. The protagonist of the novel, Tristan, has a deformed physique. His life in Africa, travel to Voorstand, and passion for becoming a performer mark the plot. His physical deformities deserve special notice while analyzing Tristan as a resilient character.

Felicity Smith, Tristan's mother, owns an avant-garde theatre in Efica named Feu Follet. Tristan was brought up in such a theatrical ambiance, which developed his interest in acting. He eventually chooses to pursue a career as an actor. He is acutely aware of the constraints imposed by his physical attributes. Tristan's efforts to achieve his passion despite his deformities made him distinctive. Analysing beyond the surface, this research article delves into Tristan's deformities, positioning them as influential factors shaping his resilience.

Since his birth, Tristan has faced aversion due to his physically disfigured appearance. He finds himself with no choice but to accept and live with those disabilities. The memories of medications and surgeries are intertwined with his childhood experiences. He remarks, "The doctors (Dr. Tu, Dr. Fischer, Dr. Wilson, Mr. Picket-Heaps, Dr. Ayisha Chaudry, Dr Brown, etc.) were able to tell my mother exactly what operation they wanted to do next, but they could find no pigeonhole to shove me in, and the summation of all of their investigations was 'Multiple Congenital Anomalies'" (Carey, 1995, 63).

Tristan's aspiration to pursue a career in acting has been at stake due to his physical appearance. Growing up in a society that prioritizes physical perfection, he recognizes that becoming an actor is something he may never consider. Still, his inquisitiveness towards becoming an actor has never faded. His way of approaching his passion is described flawlessly by Carey. Coping encompasses thoughts, emotions, and actions influenced by an individual's unique personality patterns. In an article titled "What is Coping Theory?" it has been stated that "The Strategies one chooses for adapting to a situation is highly individualized. Coping is never the same for two people" (Chowdhury, 2023). Tristan perceives his deformity as a challenge rather than a problem. His efforts to effectively navigate the obstacles posed by his deformities are remarkable.

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, in their Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, propose "Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The theory emphasizes the interaction between a person's appraisal of a stressor and coping strategies. It underlines the process of cognitive appraisal, where individuals evaluate the significance of a stressor and their ability to cope with it. When coping with deformities, individuals might appraise their deformity as a stressor and engage in problem-focused coping (finding ways to adapt to the deformity) or emotion-focused coping (managing the emotional impact of the deformity).

According to Lazarus and Folkman, the effectiveness of coping mechanisms is influenced by the emotional functions associated with the problem. Lazarus categorized eight functions that many individuals utilize to engage in active coping. They are Self-Control, Confrontation, Social Support, Emotional Distancing, Escape and Avoidance, Radical Acceptance, Positive Reappraisal and Strategic Problem-Solving. Tristan employs emotion-focused coping strategies, effectively managing the emotional effects of his deformities. Tristan has revealed a few of these emotional functions on several occasions in his life to cope with his deformities. The first function, self-control, is relevant to Tristan's persona as he tries to

control his emotions in response to the stress. In his case, it is his deformities. Regulating his emotions and actions while confronting the obstacles presented by his deformities shows his composure.

During adulthood, Tristan effectively manages his attraction to the women around him. Despite his infatuation, he maintains a high level of self-control in his demeanor. He believes that his physical flaws define his boundaries. At the outset, Tristan becomes charmed with Phonella, his twenty-year-old nurse. To ease the situation, Wally chooses to dismiss Phonella and opts to hire a male nurse instead. After Felicity's demise, Tristan finds himself under the guardianship of Wally, the production manager of Feu Follet. A male nurse is chosen to look after Tristan. However, upon realizing that the nurse is a girl in disguise, his desires are ignited by her presence—Tristan's effort to mask his desires while in her company showcases his impressive self-discipline.

In Voorstand, Tristan encounters a young woman who captivates him with charm. He vividly details the flower she gifts him. "If it was a weed, it was a pretty one. It had fleshy creamy petals like a frangipani, and the stalk was – as he said – sappy. That flower was precious to me. It produced in me the most exquisite melancholy, a kind of yearning, a profound unhappiness, an erotic kind of grief" (Carey, 1995, 257). The erotic kind of grief refers to a complex emotional state where one experiences a mixture of both pleasure and sorrow, often related to intense romantic or sexual desires that are accompanied by a sense of longing, yearning, and sometimes even pain. It is a term used to describe the intricate interplay of emotions that arise in situations involving deep and passionate feelings. This showcases his remarkable skill in suppressing his attraction to women, highlighting his exceptional self-control.

Tristan displays confrontation as he directly faces the pressure he encounters. His efforts are focused on striving to alter the circumstances to his advantage. It is exemplified by his response to his physical disability, which he acknowledges as a significant source of pressure. He is determined to confront the challenges it presents, leading him to move towards his aspirations. As Tristan tries to embody the character of the Hairy Man, he encounters a series of challenges intrinsic to the role. The character demands him to grapple with specific difficulties. Tristan has modeled his Hairy Man as a spider. To effectively portray the role, he has to study the behavior of spiders. Despite the pressure, as he finds himself unable to sustain spider-like movements for a long time, he remains resolute in his commitment. Despite the limitations, he fulfils the demands of the role. He describes,

> Their legs were fine and supple, mine were twisted, and my feet-although I hate to use the term – were clubbed. When I walked, my ankle had to do the job normally done by the sole of the foot. I had developed thick calluses all over my ankles, but to walk this way for ten minutes put strain on the knees and the hips that could cause me pain for weeks. In short, I could not do a character that walked (Ibid., 71).

Tristan believed that challenges and adversity can foster personal growth and transformation. Instead of allowing his deformities to limit him, he chooses to accept them as unique aspects of his identity that have the potential to strengthen his resilience and determination. He understands that confronting and overcoming the obstacles posed by his deformities requires him to tap into his inner strength, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. This process of facing adversity head-on pushes him to explore new perspectives. His persistent efforts towards reaching his goal are evident through the incident.

A character that displays determination despite the disfigurement exists in literature. Kattrin, in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, written by Bertolt Brecht, is an embodiment of courage. Kattrin, the daughter of Mother Courage plays the role of a silent victim throughout the play. Having fallen victim to soldiers who subjected her to rape, she subsequently lost her ability to speak and carries scars that have left her body disfigured, all due to the traumatic aftermath of the incident. Towards the end of the play, the resilience that

she represents shows her real courage. Kattrin risks her life to save the children from the war. She risks by climbing on a roof and beating a drum to call the sentry's attention to the invading troops. She is shot to death as she refuses to stop her actions. Her determination acts as a risk-bearing factor. The efforts that she puts in despite her disabilities resemble Tristan's pursuits.

Another coping strategy is seeking social support. In Tristan's life, Felicity serves as a driving force for Tristan's mindset. Felicity's positive responses deeply influence his psychological motivation. Since his birth, Felicity has remained unwavering in her support during all circumstances, consistently ensuring that he never feels limited by his condition. The support given by Wally, Bill, Vincent, Roxanna, and Jacques throughout his journey is remarkable. Jacques, as a nurse offers her support to Tristan in every possible way. She is aware of Tristan's passion for acting. She actively aids him in donning and doffing his masks. She conceives an innovative idea after observing a water Sirkus performance in Voorstand. Witnessing the effectiveness of a vocal pin employed by the performers underwater, she proposes the exact solution for Tristan. She fixes a two-pin vocal patch near Tristan's throat to make him feel better when he talks.

Jacques clarifies, "You're wearing a 'Two-pin Vocal Patch' like the actors in the Water Sirkus. You have a one-inch speaker sewn inside the Bruder's snout, and it is recommended that you change the patch every week. It's what they call a 'Mid-frame' voice. You should have seen it, the shop. You wouldn't believe the stuff they have there" (Ibid., 376). Acquiring one and guiding him through its use, Jacques leverages her understanding of Tristan's challenges to offer him a practical remedy. It offers Tristan a valuable opportunity to deliver his dialogues more clearly and effectively. His excitement upon overcoming his speech impediment is evident as he expresses, "'I…can…talk,' I said" (Ibid., 376). He repeats it twice to express his joy.

Roxanna offers her support by voicing her opinion against the adverse remarks directed at Tristan. Characters with deformities often face societal prejudice, isolation, or challenges. Their journey to overcome these obstacles can foster resilience, determination, and a stronger sense of purpose. This struggle can lead to personal growth and a heightened sense of agency. Tristan is not an exception. He faces umpteen challenges and insults throughout his life. He is not even considered a human being. Instead, people have named him a mutant. When Roxanna is with Tristan, she witnesses someone labeling him a mutant. In response, she openly displays her anger and voices her disagreement. "A child beside Roxanna spoke. 'Yuk, Maman. A mutant.' Roxanna looked down to see who had spoken – eight years old, Anglo features, brown coat, white gloves, little turned-up nose" (Ibid., 157).

The moral support Roxanna gave at that moment demonstrates her courageous demeanor and highlights her genuine care and concern for Tristan. Wally and Roxanna's care and concern towards Tristan is evident through these words,

He moved ahead of her, carrying Tristan. She followed behind, pointing her finger back at the woman. "You're so *stupid*," Roxanna said. "You're so *cowardly*." […] She was so angry. It was hard walking so fast in her red high-heels. She wanted to touch the boy, hold him, tell him she loved him even though she didn't. She circled. She shadowed. She wanted to tell him he was beautiful, that he had so much guts she could not believe him. (Ibid., 158)

Positive reappraisal is one of the coping methods through which Tristan seeks to find a solution for the struggle and grows from it. His physique poses Tristan's struggles, and his growth in the field of theatre is at stake because of them. Tristan recognizes his physique as monstrous and acknowledges that this might hinder his path to becoming an actor. Still, he is determined to successfully conquer his physical challenges and pursue his passion. It is evident when he puts in incredible effort in his rehearsals. He states, "I did my own version of 'warm-ups' and 'breathing exercises' until my clothes were covered with mud and straw and my knees were cut and bleeding" (Ibid., 70).

Deformities are powerful narrative devices that push characters beyond their comfort zones and challenge their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. By

navigating these challenges, characters can experience profound development that resonates with readers on both emotional and intellectual levels. Tristan has a dilemma about whether to reveal or conceal his differences. Mostly, he tries to conceal them as people dislike him for being different. However, later, he realizes that he is unique and faces society. Ultimately, he ends up being a performer who narrates his story, which is full of twists and turns.

A detailed study of the character Tristan reflects the role played by his deformities in several circumstances in his life. Tristan's willingness to accept his deformities as catalysts for growth enables him to develop a more profound sense of self-acceptance and self-confidence. He becomes a role model for overcoming limitations by challenging societal norms and stereotypes. The transformation journey not only shapes his character but also inspires those around him, showing that even in the face of adversity, one can forge a path to personal development.

The process of accepting one's physical anomaly can serve as a central element in the growth of a character. A character with physical abnormality may initially reject his appearance, but over time, he learns to accept his uniqueness, leading to a more authentic and self-assured sense of self. This is true in the case of Tristan. He utilizes his uniqueness to attain his objective. Through his dedication, unwavering persistence, the encouragement of those around him and ultimately his resolute determination, he transforms himself into a performer.

Tristan's coping methods that center around his emotions aid him in his journey toward a changed identity. The emotional functions such as self-control, confrontation, social support, and positive reappraisal make Tristan a transformed individual. Tristan understands that his deformities are his limits. Hence, he remains in control of his emotions and actions. He is willing to try to achieve his passion even though his deformities pose certain professional risks. Being accepted and supported by people around him gives Tristan enough motivation. Tristan accepts and grows with the deformed physique and succeeds as a performer.

To conclude, Tristan's deformities are a driving force behind his controlled emotions, determined self, and positive approach toward life. Tristan can be considered a source of inspiration as he effectively overcomes the barriers his deformities pose. His deformities catalyze molding him into a person who is socially accepted. Viewing deformities as chances rather than imperfections sets him apart as an exceptional individual.

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