

Southern New Hampshire University

DISABLED IDENTITIES REVEALED THROUGH THE EMPIRICISM OF A QUARTET OF  
FEMALE DRAMATIS PERSONAE: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC  
PORTRAIT

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

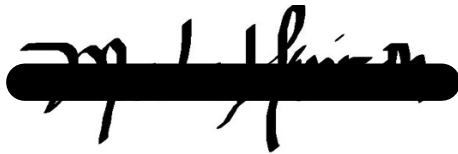
By Anthony Domenick

Nutley, New Jersey  
October 2022



Student: Anthony Domenick

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**Abstract:**

Dramatists have always built upon pure psychological foundations for character development. The intrinsic qualities associated with humanity impel subjective thoughts, insights, and interpretations on consciousness and introspection. There have been a plethora of protagonists and antagonists to illustrate this argument. In particular, the following four female personas exemplify motifs of affliction, dereliction and social ostracism: Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller from *The Miracle Worker*, Sarah Norman from *Children of a Lesser God*, and Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*. These characters are detailed and contrasted through an autoethnographic perspective culminating in the universal theme of psychosocial survival. The cognitive processes, sensibilities, and visceral tendencies of these disabled female characters rouse exploration. Orphaned, blind, and institutionalized, Annie Sullivan overcame egregious cruelties through fervency for an education. With indefatigable exertion, her first job was teaching a deaf, blind, and mute Helen Keller, an exile from humanity, appropriate behavior and basic communication skills with the ultimate goal of language and its significance. The pedagogy process becomes a quagmire of violent tantrums and thwarted efforts. Analogously, Sarah Norman is also a defector from humanity. A version of a misanthrope, Sarah rejects the hearing world with its condescending nonconformity to the language, culture, and values of her world, the deaf world. Laura Wingfield also disengages humankind with a penchant for escapism tethered to an incandescent menagerie of unicorns. What is most intriguing about all four personas is the dramatist's distillation of the human experience, in particular, their social and psychological adaptation and resignation as an affirmation of their inured reality.

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**Key Words:** disability, blindness, deafness, autoethnography, existential, and psychosocial

## **An Autoethnographic Introduction**

***“Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” Helen Keller***

There are sorrows that can kill. At four years old, tragedy discovered me. It descended upon me, striking like an avalanche and then buried me. I was denied the spirit and innocence of childhood; for doctors removed my right eye. My sensibility would soon harbor a vanguard of bitterness. At the time, I did not possess the comprehension or the realization to unravel the significance of this casualty. Instead, I was seized only by an emotional exigency to mourn. This relentless grief would permeate like a contagion all of my life. Apparently, it was an eye mutilated from hereditary glaucoma, and to add insult to injury, an accident ensued causing further deterioration. I have no recollection of the moment of the accident. However, an aftermath of daunting images fragment in hallucinations within the horror of feverish truth. These images would consign to linger. Unusual and mysterious figures encroach the brim between the conscious and unconscious realms of perception. Beleaguered by perpetual guilt, my mother and father never discussed the specifics of the misfortune with me, and I was afraid to ask; since, inquiry meant confirmation that it did, in fact, occur. I eschewed reality and my afflicted identity. Both terrified me. I wanted to engage in a self-expression submerged in the fantasy of being someone else, someone who was a whole person, untainted by disease. Instead, I was descending into a permanent state of dissolution. A few years later, my father, who was compelled by the gospel-truth that comes from alcohol binging, admitted that I ran into an exposed cast iron galvanized pipe while playing wiffle ball, and plunged face-first on its circular fitting. This warranted an unconscious penchant for self-reproach. I would always persevere on the loss as the guilt would grow stronger in my consciousness. Why did I maim myself?

Imperative “what ifs” would impel me. I can only recall my desperate cries, the impetuous sorrow my mother inhabited as she stood paralyzed in anguish staring out the kitchen window, my consternation, and my apprehension. I would later grow anti-social in my failed attempt at a disguised normalcy. Withdrawal behaviors, self-pitying behaviors and marked aggressive behaviors characterized my singular social existence. At four years old, I could not relinquish the limited chronology of a past when hope and innocence are synonymous with a child’s sensibility. Of the residual cycles relative to grieving, I later chose to immerse myself exclusively in unadulterated anger. My remaining intact eye would also soon betray me with the advent of esoteric cataracts, the obstructed nerve signaling of a detached retina, and the opaque abyss of glaucoma. I remain disabled with low vision in the blindness and sight of repressed memories that predominated throughout my youth and in my present adult life. Self-esteem concomitant with self-contentment would elude me as my loss redefined me with a disabled identity.

My consciousness would drown in the mire of desolation, depression, dereliction, maladjustment, and a self-imposed ostracism, comfortable in its stoicism. Through a shroud of phantasm, the permeability of foreign sensations, the biting odors of antiseptics, and the frigid numbness intensify a memory of a lasting turmoil. I can still envision outlines of shadowy figments as I lay in a prostrate surrender wheeled beneath surgical lights circular with radii that demarcate defeat granting the foreboding figures to violate me: the ether laden mask inching over my face in suffocation, a nurse’s scant lips glibly uttering the plenteously deceptive words, “it’ll be all over with soon,” in echolalia, and the formidable white coat presence of the surgeon’s hands grasping a scissored enucleation hooked instrument with my severed orbit on its tip. Afterwards, belt-like restraints encumber the wrists of my hands as they tether to the rails of a crib, where I lay in the corner of a ward with two unoccupied beds under an oblique-angled

ceiling. I manage to shift my shoulders upward to the restricted space where the ceiling and crib meet, and crane my neck, with patched right socket in the direction of a tempered glass door, where nurses proceed in busy deliberation. Their glances are oblivious to my interminable desperation as plaintive cries augment with intensity, and attempts to release my enslaved hands flail in futile rescue executed in bloody abrasions. Although I could not articulate it, my individuation was dissipating in extinction. That hospital room, where a four-year old boy lay still in a tumult of trembling, would foreshadow as a permanent metaphor of hopelessness, psychic oppression, and disengagement. Sigmund Freud speaks of fixed experiences from the past that have alienated people from their sense of self, specifically, the fundamental role trauma plays. Freud explains:

An experience which we call traumatic is one which within a very short space of time subjects the mind to such a very high increase of stimulation that assimilation or elaboration of it can no longer be affected by normal means, so that lasting disturbances must result in the distribution of the available energy in the mind. (Freud 243)

My anguish, ravaged by the inexplicable, the unknowable, has identified me as a person who would live with a disability all of his life. It paralyzed my ability to experience healing, as it affirmed the significant role that danger would always beckon and dwell within my ontology. It would take me years before I would be able to make attempts to transcend the solitude that denotes disability. I did not know how to relinquish a behaviorism of suffering and affliction. At some point, I did know that I would have to reformulate my sensibility to the independence that comes with acquiring an education. This autoethnographic trajectory identifies a qualitative structure of research into the revelatory exploration of four *dramatis personae* from Drama. Cognitive and behavioral inquiries into the ostracized identity of four female disabled characters

created by playwrights William Gibson, Mark Medoff, and Tennessee Williams reflect a humanistic existentialism of psychological and sociological self-encounter.

### **Drama as a Disability Principle**

Drama has become a vigorous force as a literary genre; since, dramatists have always built upon pure psychological foundations for character development. They amplify the human condition through conflicts and struggles with life forces. Subtext consorts the aesthetic structure of drama. In *The Elements of Drama*, author J.L. Styan quotes the actor and producer Konstantin Stanislavsky on the significance of subtext as a “web of innumerable, inner patterns inside a play, inner movements, objects of attention and greater truths and a belief in them...” (Styan 13) The subtextual qualities associated with the disabled compel subjective thoughts, insights, and interpretations on consciousness and introspection. To illustrate this argument, four female personas exemplify motifs of affliction, abandonment, and social ostracism: Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller from *The Miracle Worker*, Sarah Norman from *Children of a Lesser God*, and Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*. These characters particularize the concept of physical aberration by virtue of the culminating theme of psychosocial survival. The cognitive processes, sensibilities, and visceral tendencies of these four disabled characters rouse exploration. Orphaned, blind, and institutionalized, Annie Sullivan transcended egregious cruelties by acquiring a fervency to receive an education. With indefatigable fortitude, Annie’s first job was teaching the blind, deaf, and mute Helen Keller, an exile from humanity. The pedagogical process began with the modeling of appropriate social behaviors, and basic communication skills as a precedent to the acquisition of language and its application. However, the instructional practice emerges in a quagmire of violent tantrums and thwarted efforts. Analogously, Sarah Norman is also a defector from humanity. A version of a malcontent, Sarah



repudiates the hearing world with all of its condescending non-conformity to the language, culture, and values of her world, the deaf world. Laura Wingfield, who is physically disabled, also disengages society with a penchant for escapism as she is tethered to an incandescent menagerie of unicorns. What is most intriguing about these four personas is how the dramatist distills the human experience. Their social and psychological adaptation and / or resignation affirms how these characters have been inured to their disabilities. Scientists have denoted clinical definitions of the term, “disabled.” The structural explanations can range anywhere from sensory and motor deficiencies to mental and emotional disorders. The interpersonal and behavioral dynamic of the human condition through characterization is very specific to each impairment category. However, it is the dramatist, with his artistry of technique, who makes one feel and experience through the cognitive domain.

Through character, behavior, and written dialogue, the dramatists, William Gibson, Mark Medoff, and Tennessee Williams examine the disabled character as a tragic figure struggling to transcend their individual fates. In “The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy,” tragedy is defined as “a commonplace realism that dooms the characters to a low level of consciousness for dramatic representation as well as a low view of humanity” (Gassner 3). These dramatists create a reality of characters in the tenet of tragic situations who search for the reconciliation of their suffering. Each persona confronts a multitude of responses to the paradox of their disabled existences: fears, anxieties, and sufferings are expressed by the playwright in an effort to procure pathos and enlightenment from the audience. In the traditional genre of tragedy, the hero or heroine descends in a fall from grace from some egregious foible. With Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller, Sarah Norman, and Laura Wingfield, the converse is true. They are initially flawed and isolated from disability; yet, they struggle to ascend in the amplitude of self-identity.

In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley references Edward Bullough's philosophical distinction between life and its imitative art through drama. In his essay entitled "Psychical Distance," the scholar of modern languages has been quoted as saying:

The exceptional element in tragic figures—that which makes them so utterly different from characters we meet in ordinary experience—is a consistency of direction, a fervor of ideality, a persistent and driving force, which is far above the capacities of average men.

(Bentley 40)

Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller, Sarah Norman, and Laura Wingfield are individuals with disabilities who are set apart in their environments and deviate in their psycho-social adjustments. They are tragic figures because they internalize the irrevocableness of their respective plights. Through the initiation of personal reflection founded in the first-hand experience of disability, insights and interpretations of this quartet of female characters will be revealed. As archetypally impaired protagonists, the emotional life of the individual affirms significant truths in their evacuation from socially constructed criteria.

### **The Critical Disabilities Approach**

Social gauges have always determined behaviors and feelings toward disparate factions in society. Specifically, social constructs have thwarted the identity of the disabled through bias and fallacy when it comes to their value as individuals. This has caused the disabled to be targets for oppression, compromised self-esteem, and a perennial designation as members in the non-entity realm of the disenfranchised. Reactions and behaviors of the nondisabled toward the disabled are pre-requisites to this social occurrence. In an essay entitled "Disability Goes Cultural," author Anne Waldschmidt references the convoluted notion that trivializes the manifestation of

disabilities and the complex ramifications involved with its understanding. She quotes Lennard J. Davis, a scholar on disability studies, who expresses the typical empiricism that pervades the public:

When it comes to disability, ‘normal people’ are quite willing to volunteer solutions, present anecdotes, recall from a vast array of films instances they take for fact. No one would dare to make such a leap into Heideggerian philosophy for example or the art of the Renaissance. But disability seems so obvious- a missing limb, blindness, deafness. What could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there. (Waldschmidt 19)

The author is affirming here that the connotation of the term, “disabled” and its social identification are viewed as a simplification relative to unhealthiness, aberrancy, and a heinous stigma. Society has relegated the disabled to a subculture, who have no potential to achieve a zenith in status associated with human endeavors. Their impairment thwarts the assimilation of physical, psychological, and cultural virtues. The deprivation of, or the serious debasement of one’s integrity, reforms the disabled person’s consciousness to maladjustment disorders displaying persistent patterns of anger, shame, guilt, and diminished self-esteem.

This display of vulnerabilities permits society carte-blanche to enhance, define, and chastise the culture of the disabled. This is evident in *Children of A Lesser God* as James Leeds tries to convince Sarah Norman that she must learn to speak and read lips so that she can function and conform to the hearing world. Sarah refutes this notion with her credo that if the hearing world respects her, then they should adopt her language as an operable means of communication. In *The Miracle Worker*, Mr. Anagnos urges Annie Sullivan to obliterate the memories of her past when she was reared in a Massachusetts state asylum, where she learned to be combative. He

believes this position would be a detriment to her work with the deaf-blind child. When Sullivan climactically defies Captain Keller's staunch criticism of her rigorous pedagogy, her response becomes the thesis for disabled advocacy. Sullivan retorts, "Don't smooth anything else out for me, don't interfere in any way! I treat her like a seeing child because I ask her to see, I expect her to see, don't undo what I do!" (Gibson 114). Yet, it is this very contentious nature that inspires Annie's strength of character and determination, attributes that sanction her with the capacity to teach a disabled child. With her convoluted perceptions of her daughter's disabled identity, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* denies the reality of Laura's physical limitations. The mother imparts delusional thinking about the girl's potential future: a prospective career as a business woman or marriage to the ideal man. However, Laura is an anomaly, and these conventional lifestyles are not in the realm of possibilities. When Laura interrupts with, "But, Mother—I'm crippled" (Williams 410), Laura is acknowledging her aberration with candid acceptance. Being a low-vision student in grammar and high school, I was seated in the back of the room with academically deficient students. There, I was purposely obscured and ostensibly ousted from classroom discussions and activities. The teachers were ill-informed about how to facilitate a partially-sighted student in the education process. They viewed low-vision as synonymous with cognitive deficiency despite a 90<sup>th</sup> percentile score on an aptitude test. When I approached teachers for supplemental assistance in the individual subject area because I could not see the blackboard, they responded in a perfunctory state of nervousness, avoided me with blatant indifference, rationalized their deficiency in methodology for the atypical student, and were reluctant to fully understand what I could or could not see. I relied solely on my tape-recorder, by which, each night, I would transcribe the day's audio lessons into written notes. I knew that I had to compensate through long hours of tedium to set the precedence for my

education, since my teachers were unavailable to me. I forced myself to take a pro-active position of self. The intrinsic essence of these four impaired personalities, and how they are constructed by their disability, parallels the extrinsic subjectivity of their interaction with the abled population. In order to achieve conformity, each character must acquire some semblance of strength that can grant them the transcendence of their impaired physicality. This becomes the gateway to their assimilation into humanity. These examples corroborate the devastating effects that transpire in the dynamics between the disabled and the abled interpersonal relationships. This prompts the idea of disability as a cultural phenomenon. Mindsets toward those with sensory, motor, and cognitive disabilities become both the objective and the subjective designs of a systematized culture. In an essay entitled, “Material Disability,” presents a thesis of antithesis maintaining that, “A posthumanist disability studies posits new connections [dethroning] the ideal of human cognitive, physical, emotional normal—the goal of disabilities all along” (Crilley 310). The role of culture can be incorporated as a categorical variable of analysis to an all-embracing outlook on disability studies.

Waldschmidt connects The Social Model of Disability as a prototype for discussion on disability as a social conception. She delineates the significance of three premises for scholars to synthesize:

First, disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons are a minority group that is discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society. Second, impairment and disability need to be distinguished and do not have a causal relation; it is not impairments per se which disable, but societal practices of disablement which result in disability. Third, it is a society’s responsibility to remove the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing. (Waldschmidt 21)

The personal experiences of this quartet of female disabled characters under discussion, in addition to myself, convey a culture of individuals who are forced to contend with their individual afflictions; while, they simultaneously persist against the misperceptions of a society that is reluctant to reform a biased able-bodied value system. Instability, ineptitude, and dependency characterize the abled mindsets about the disabled population. Because of these foibles, the abled population believe they have the right to ascribe or mold the disabled's existence. It is the disabled's self-identity that is the determining variable, not a pre-ordained social construct. Instead, there should be the ideal advocacy of, "treating disability as a cultural trope" (Waldschmidt 22). Annie Sullivan is forced to overcome her own disability while teaching a reluctant Helen to behave in a civilized decorum, a demeanor her family denied the expectation of. Annie faces the additional burden of confronting Helen's parents, whose only concern is discipline and not language development. When Kate, Helen's mother, greets Annie at the train station, she becomes acutely aware of Annie's physical anomaly. As father Captain Keller and mother Kate observe Annie's atypical non-verbal mannerisms in her initial interaction with Helen, Captain Keller asks why Annie is wearing sunglasses. Kate responds with the fact that Annie was blind, and received nine operations on her eyes prior to her assignment with the Kellers. This leaves Captain Keller exasperated with doubt about Annie's pedagogical abilities. James, Helen's half-brother, cynically remarks, "Great improvement. Now we have two of them to look after" (Gibson 33). Both male characters deliver a patriarchal cultural vision of disability. As members of mainstream humanity, they respond with denigration. They also fail to cultivate a connection to the struggles of the disabled. The Keller's social expectancy of a model teacher is one that evokes the optimum of being able-bodied only. Anticipatory behaviors and expectations are ingrained by society regarding the role and status of the disabled. Despite her scholastic

achievements as valedictorian of the Perkins School for the Blind and Deaf, Captain Keller and James relegate Annie to society's debased stereotype of the blind—a notch above a pencil vendor. The Kellers cannot accept Helen's multiple disabilities so they are only able to cope through the disposition of pity. For them, blindness and deafness are interpreted as a cognitively developmental impairment. Kate confesses to Annie, "Before you came we spoke of putting her in an asylum" (Gibson 74), then Captain Keller adds, "For mental defectives" (Gibson 74). Without reproaching them, the Kellers are guilty of, "the societal practices of disablement" (Waldschmidt 21); since, they are not equipped to perceive beyond the disability that, to them, only certifies misfortune and anguish. They fail to comprehend how Sullivan's ideology of educating a disabled child is one that requires unequivocal discipline while thwarting pathos, is the only strategy of acquiescence to the norms that will advance to a whole self. Sarah Norman's deafness denotes no ability for sound perception as opposed to those who are hard of hearing. Explicit conflict is established between the hearing instructor and the deaf student. Sarah believes that American Sign Language is a language that is equally applicable as English. She accuses James, the hearing language instructor, as being the omniscient prophet of the hearing world; since, he advocates conformity to the status-quo of hearing through speech and lip-reading. Sarah rejects this as a bias proclamation from hearing teachers, who are motivated to change the pedagogy and culture of the deaf. For Sarah, the deaf realm should take precedence over the hearing domain. When Sarah comments, "How would you like to spend your life in an institution, in a world run by people who don't understand you?" (Medoff 25), distorted cultural representations of the disabled are apparent. She is re-establishing disability as a form of insurrection against the social construct of oppression. The deaf body becomes activated as a political defense of the disabled. For Sarah, deafness as a disability is not a diminished entity; it

is as prolific in equity as is hearing. The placating blandishments made to Laura Wingfield by Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller, function as a pretense of empathy toward those whose limbs are compromised. Laura accepts the preconceived biases that Jim and society have about the disabled's acceptance in the territory of intimacy. Physical romance with an abled lover is as credible for Laura as it is for a leper. All four disabled characters are profoundly impacted by social catalysts of disdain, to which they have become acclimated, and which fundamentally materialize in their lives. Cultural practices have promulgated the homogenized retort to the disabled, and the disabled's unequivocal and inured conformity to the dictates of survival.

### **Psychological Complications**

Disabilities defined by physical and cognitive deviations result in social ostracism, a devalued self-esteem, self-reproach, emotional abuse, depression, the repercussions from trauma, and social adjustment disorders. The interaction between the disabled and the abled are critical to psycho-social development. Sigmund Freud's model of the human psyche outlines a dichotomy of consciousness and unconsciousness that collaborate in the illustration of these four characters as three-dimensional figures. For the disabled, there are suppressed and unresolved conflicts rooted in the subconscious that then materialize through reactive behaviors in the consciousness. Freud relies heavily on the role of the unconscious, as it plays a vital part in the interior life experiences of the disabled. The repertoire of behaviors by the four disabled females are motivated by psychic forces over which they have restrictions in control. Helen Keller's primitive behaviors thwart social adaptation, and conceal perceptions about the world around her. The residual effects of a fever that left her blind, deaf, and mute remain in a subconscious that toils the urgency to communicate and understand. Annie Sullivan is a plagued by a subaltern past manifested through nightmares and flashbacks about her grim childhood in the



Massachusetts State Almshouse, where she and her brother were abandoned to live. Annie uses her projected anger as determination and strength of character in her objective to teach Helen language as the structure to cognitive development. Sarah Norman's psyche is a complex schism between the pressures of integrating into the hearing world while maintaining her identity as a deaf woman in the deaf world. Rooted in a childhood of isolation and derision, she transitions to an adulthood that perpetuates the deaf culture through the substantive lexicon of American Sign Language (ASL). This enhances Sarah with a strong sense of self that is only possible in the deaf world. Laura Wingfield reverses the conscious reality of her disability through fantasy as a motivational force to remedy an unsatisfying existence. Her menagerie acts as a form of self-preservation, a diversion from the cruelties of the external world. All four female characters engage in a repression of their disability image. Freud theorizes that, "Thus the content of a repressed idea can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is negated. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed, it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed" (Freud 667). The disabled constantly confront resistance in their consciousness as they struggle to construct self-identity.

The implication to redeeming the disabled's identity is adjustment; since, the underlying residual effect of disability is the response of maladjustment. In *Physical Disability—A Psychological Approach*, author Beatrice Wright addresses many variables associated with disability including acquiescing, coping, and the ultimate mindset of acceptance. She expounds on the psychosocial premises to the adjustment of disability:

The maladjustive reactions to disability, however, are important first efforts in the process of accepting one's disability and one self. Gradually and intermittently, the individual may become aware of the strain that nonacceptance of his disability imposes, and of how, in

spite of all his efforts to the contrary, his deviation is real and has personal and social effects. (Wright 107)

Psychological adjustment to the functional limitations of each character is characterized by varying degrees of resilience and alternative coping mechanisms. Helen Keller replies to her blindness, deafness, and muteness like the barbarism of an obdurate creature with primal movements and guttural utterances. Admitting to Kate Keller, Helen's mother, that she has been blind herself, Annie Sullivan must reconcile to an engulfment of conflicts including: the dubious perceptions about her from the parents, the denigration from the step-brother, the unproven pedagogy of remediating the unspeakable sensory deprivation of Helen, and most disconcerting, a self-ontology saturated in low vision, emotional insecurities, and a disturbing past. Annie tries to compensate for her flawed existence with a verbal resume of her abilities. She discloses, "I've read every word Dr. Howe wrote about [the blind-deaf] and he wasn't exactly what you'd call a man of few words. Another is to be young, why I've got energy to do anything" (Gibson 29). Annie is perceptive enough to sense Kate's scrutiny of her enigmatic demeanor. Annie, like all disabled do, wants to atone for her inadequacies by diverting the attention away from the impairment and focus on a potential strength they struggle to muster; yet, whose credence even to one's disabled self is always in doubt. Helen's self-effacement of her disability surfaces when, in her first interaction with Annie, Helen's face hastens away from Annie's grasp in avoidance of the intimate encounter, where Helen's aberration is nakedly palpable. Sarah Norman views her deafness as intrinsic to the American Sign Language (ASL) culture of interaction. She expects the hearing world to learn her language. James, her teacher-husband, has been demanding that she learn to speak throughout their relationship. When he finally goads her to the point of exasperation, Sarah responds in a violent self-defense, "Speech! Speech! Is that it? No! You

want me to be your child. You want me to be like you. How do you like my voice? Am I beautiful?” (Medoff 92). Sarah realizes that her speech is uttered in an indecipherable manner, provoking the self-consciousness of shame. Sarah’s reluctance to speak is a way of camouflaging her deafness. Laura Wingfield feigns illness as she is apprehensive about coming to the dinner table where the gentleman caller awaits. When she finally agrees to meet Jim, he proves to be charming and she temporarily forgets about her impaired leg. As she ingratiates Jim with blandishments about his singing and other talents, which he indulges through self-aggrandizement, the disability becomes non-existent. This reversal whereby Jim is the focal point subliminally delays Laura’s emotional processing of her disability in a social context. The psychological functioning of the four female disabled characters shares similar patterns of a struggle in adaptation. They strive to resolve their circumstances while simultaneously changing the circumstances in order to acclimate to their imposed existence of perpetual adversity. The oppression they experience as a disabled person is both intrinsic to its inner consciousness and extrinsic to its social environment. Each of the character’s reactive qualities in their rejection of self, calls attention to the cognizant processing of acceptance and adjustment. Ultimately, all four female characters are forced to accept themselves in spite of recognizing the inevitable depth of their limitations, to which they have no realistic recourse or alternative. Wright places exceptional importance to the body as self. Psychoanalytic theory positions the physical self as instrumental in the development of the ego. It is also critical to how the disabled person distinguishes himself from his imposed reality. She alludes to a Freudian disciple Otto Fenichel, who states this affirmation with the following explanation:

In the development of reality, the conception of one’s own body plays a very special role.

At first there is only the perception of tension, that is, of an “inside something.” Later with

the awareness that an object exists to quiet this tension, we have an “outside something.”

One’s own body is both at the same time. Due to the simultaneous occurrence of both outer tactile and inner sensory data, one’s own body becomes something apart from the rest of this world and thus the discerning of self from nonself is made possible. (Wright 139-140)

Laura, who becomes the object of maudlin conception from the gentleman caller, and despite her pretense of acceptance and docility, resents her reality by engaging in a pronounced fantasy existence. Helen’s blind-deaf existence is characterized by a self-absorption that restricts interaction with her external environment. Her blindness and deafness as a bodily presence elude the concept of social relationships. Sarah Norman’s unadulterated deafness allows her to only interact with members of the American Sign Language (ASL) community. Interaction with the hearing world is null and void. The hearing world’s indifference to her precipitates a conspicuous antisocial propensity. Annie Sullivan is a hybrid of hope and despair. Her sunglasses, which conceal her affliction, permit a tentative assimilation into the sighted world. The duality of blindness and partially sighted existences gives her an element of danger; since, there is always the apprehension of losing her vision, a curse that will sabotage any semblance of a livelihood.

### **Annie Sullivan: Tenacity Within Struggle**

Emotional lacerations and a desolation of spirit beleaguer the afflicted Annie Sullivan, a resolute teacher besieged by unspeakable demons from the past. She adopts a pedagogy rooted in tough love as she infiltrates the world of a feral mind. Annie shares with her student the status of being members of the disenfranchised in a world of deliberate alienation. Through a Rock of Gibraltar determination and in the private moment depths of melancholy, Annie coalesces these two liabilities in a strife of volition to liberate her student’s disturbed embodiment of sensory

privation. Annie confronts obstacles that thwart the delivery of a distinctive pedagogy for self-discovery and language development. There is incessant conflict with the parents, who doubt her competence, the half-brother, who cynically derides her ambition, and most blatantly, Helen, who responds to Annie with a repudiated barbarism. Annie makes painstaking efforts to unveil Helen's esoteric intelligence and abilities, which lurk in a padlock of subconsciousness. Obtrusively, they impose a similitude of estrangement on one another with each character reluctant to relinquish her obstinacy of will.

The psyche of Annie Sullivan has always been a source of turbulence and destruction. Parents abandoned her and her crippled brother to a state institution where she "learned to be saucy" (Gibson 17). Battling the organic defect of blindness, familial neglect, and rejection, her existence at an early age was characterized by struggle and the denial of healthy interpersonal contact. This has instilled an emotional multitude of ill-responses that warranted repression as the precedent to daily survival. However, the impervious nature of anger, mourning, bitterness, and resentment are always ready to surface and ravage the disabled's stability and sense of purpose, making the disabled's expression often an aberration in feeling and response. This somber foreboding has always tortured and breached Annie Sullivan's identity and self-worth. After Annie's initial lesson introducing the deaf alphabet with finger configurations spelling d-o-l-l and c-a-k-e, Helen capriciously responds with a violent thrashing of the doll to Annie's face, exits, and locks Annie in her room. When the family is made aware, the brief interchange between Annie and Captain Keller captures the typically biased stance of the nondisabled toward the disabled:

Keller. Miss Sullivan! Are you in there?

Annie. Oh, I'm in here all right.

Keller. Is there no key on your side?

Annie. [with some asperity]: Well, if there was a key in here, I wouldn't be in here. Helen took it, the only thing on my side is me.

Keller. Miss Sullivan. I- (He tries but cannot hold it back.) Not in the house ten minutes, I don't see how you managed it!

Annie. And even I'm not on my side. (Gibson 41-42).

Captain Keller's exasperation and debasement vis-à-vis Annie's retort reflect the self-reproach that most disabled harbor in their consciousness. It is self-deprecation that overshadows when one is diseased. This self-reproach materializes and unalterably correlates with feelings of inferiority in the dimension of depression. Throughout the play, Annie expresses a prolonged state of feeling futile. Annie's sense of failure here expedites a sense of self that becomes absorbed in inhibition. Annie "represents [her] ego as worthless, incapable of any achievement, [she] reproaches [herself], vilifies [herself] and expects to be cast out and punished" (Freud 584). Captain Keller's annoyance at the situation reinforces Annie's revoked ego with intensified, unsettled feelings of inferiority. However, in Annie's case, it is this insecurity that becomes the driving force behind her goal to become educated and instruct the blind-deaf. Alfred Adler's theory of personality adjustment suggest that, to some degree, every one experiences some form of inadequacy that transfers from childhood to adulthood. To remediate this foible, he cites that there is the need for a "goal demanding not only security, peace and social equilibrium, but power over his environment" (Adler 1881). As an inmate in the Massachusetts state asylum, she summons enough courage to beseech officials with the plea, "I want to go to school" (Gibson 68). She later attended the Perkins School for the Blind, where she excelled as valedictorian and

became a teacher. Annie represents a disabled's ability to rise above the subjugation of a subordinate-status position to become an advocate for the value that education can have in a disabled's existence. However, Annie's first pedagogical defeat, along with the embarrassment directed by Captain Keller, consciously consign her to the inconsequential helplessness that the disabled are made to feel. The empiricism associated with social interactions "orientate the [disabled] in the chaos of existence" (Adler 1883). For this reason, Sullivan must work more diligently at a purpose for existence to achieve an uncompromised autonomy. As a member of the disabled community, Annie could never eradicate the "thorn that which has pierced [her] side in the early days of [her] existence" (Adler 1885). Like most disabled, Annie would be estranged by the nondisabled, yet she always had the exigency for transcendence. Her relentless efforts at demanding manageability and introducing rhetoric through the language of the deaf alphabet creates the definitive emotional and intellectual connection.

Annie's penchant for a connection to her past is just as imperative as her desire to teach Helen the conceptualization of meaning. William Gibson applies the flashback technique to represent the dramatic residuals of Annie's past psychic discord in consciousness. This affect is concomitant with the effect her past disturbances have on her present quest to transform a wild child to a disciplined student immigrating to the dominion of language. In this way, Annie's complex emotional life is revealed. She is inundated with guilt for abandoning her brother, who died in the asylum from a tubercular hip. Their relationship co-dependended upon his need for maternal security and her commitment to assume a substitution in parental responsibility. His death prompted her subconscious reluctance to relinquish a guilt that would curse her. His voice of pleas and cries haunts and posits her to intermittent bouts of melancholy. Annie's trauma

revisits her as she consults a text by Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe on the methodology of teaching the deaf-blind from the Perkins Institute.

Boy's Voice. Annie? Annie, you there ?

Annie. Hush

Boy's Voice. Annie, what's that noise?

Annie. Just a cot, Jimmie.

Boy's Voice. Where they pushin' it?

Annie. To the deadhouse.

Boy's Voice. Annie. Does it hurt to be dead?

(Silence. Annie sits with her eyes shining, her hand in almost a caress over the book Then:)

Boy's Voice. You ain't goin' to school are you, Annie?

Annie. [whispering] When I grow up.

Boy's Voice. You ain't either. You're going to stay here take care of me. You said we'll be together forever and ever.

Annie. [fierce] I said I'm going to school when I grow up. (Gibson 68-69)

Annie cannot eclipse the horror of her childhood in the almshouse as she manifests and submits to guilt, shame, and melancholy. Annie's work with Helen provides a restricted digression from the disabled's reality. This prompts "the emergence of a traumatic moment which cannot be dealt with objectively and gives the situation of danger its significance" (Freud 782). The flashes and voices of Annie's past where she fumbles for her brother on a gurney, and is subjected to the



taunts of the old crone asylum inmates would never dissipate; this is a derivative of a nihilistic fate. Annie is anchored by an anguish that has created a schism in consciousness. In one respect, the trauma behaves as a catalyst to launch pedagogy; however, it also immerses her into an inescapable cognizance and the perception of being damaged. Annie's physical and emotional imperfections have tortured her spirit and burdened a body-mind inter-relationship of deficiency.

### **An Autoethnographer's Memory**

Akin to Annie Sullivan, whose beginnings were characterized by organic defects, I, too, would always toil with the reality of a defective identity. It would flounder in reluctant adaptation to a fraught existence of past abuses. Annie cannot extricate herself from retrospection for "God must owe me a resurrection because he keeps digging up that battle" (Gibson 17). My atrocity would habitually resurface and manifest in a sequestered fate ensconced in a profound distortion of self-image that comes with physical aberration. Some days it would glare more palpable, and the dark struggle to come to terms would becloud and requite in the shell shock of melancholia. I often drift into a remembrance that transports me into the profound unsettling of persistent trepidation. An eager anxiety would subjugate me into the significance of a vacillation in psyche.

*(There was a makeshift office room that resembled the severity of a tenement dwelling. Its sloven appearance was an assault on the senses: holes in the walls that perforated through sheet rock, chemical solution bottles that elicit a concoction in odor fusing the acrid quality of ammonia with the offensiveness of nitrate toxins, tarnished tools, wizened paint brushes with dried pigment, and overused liner paint brushes with frayed bristles lay in chaotic path on a stainless steel table that surround machinery reverberating in a conveyor belt sound as it transforms material and metal into shell-shaped coverings. Then there were the eyes. A plethora of these*

*curved globes were lying about in an asymmetric ogling. Some were cut concave with finished shells of pupils, irises, and sclera singularly connected like a series of diminutive mollusks. In the corner of the room, a five-year-old boy hid under one of the tables. His body shuddered with such fright that his legs and arms wriggled against the hinged leaves causing an unnerving disturbance. His parents were trying to coax him out from under the table. At first, they used kind platitudes along the lines that everything will be fine, to come and sit down so the man could make him "something to wear so he could look better." The boy protested. He writhed, wailed, kicked, and winced in an acrimony of sobs. After several minutes of this, the parents grew weary of placation. Their patience waned quickly only to swell with obtuse discipline. The exasperated father knelt down in a face-to-face encounter with the boy whose eyelids from the unscathed red eye distended like fluid retention. The father's inebriated breath spewed against the boy's mien like a sucker punch. Unmoved by the boy's frantic state, the father snatched the boy's arm, and in the process, the boy's forehead struck the edge of the table. The blow ejected the patch supported by gauze tape that covered the barren cavity. As the boy catapulted from the floor, clumps of mucus oozed from the eye socket and settled on the table where he was restrained to be fitted.*

*The boy watched as the ocularist positioned his prosthesis on an inclined stainless-steel surface of a device resembling a cold cut machine. He manipulated an adjustable knob which allowed a blade to trim the welded pallid material that functioned as the sclera. It was a trial-and-error painstaking process for the ocularist: Cut then insert the finished shell into the socket, cut then insert to test the fit. He approached the boy with a forced vigilance. The ocularist had an antiseptic countenance of indistinct features accentuated by a steadfast scrutiny behind thick-lensed horn-rimmed glasses. With parents gripping the boy's shoulder blades forward in*

*submission, the ocularist tilted the boy's chin toward the ceiling. His fingers, cold and calloused, widened the lids for placement. The boy flinched recoiling from the position to focus on the grimy glassed skylight where birds hovered against a languid respite of summer blue. He willed that the birds, with their flapping and guiding wings, would relieve his anguish, vouchsafe him freedom, and corral him in their flight. Inexplicably numb sensations formed somewhere between his fissured heart and tumultuous psyche. Like an aphasic, he could not express the subliminal words of his guilt, "I'll be good, I won't run after the ball down that alleyway again, please, I don't want the man near me, please." Yet, the boy was only capable of maundering a litany of "nos." The choking gasps convulsing from his stomach never ceased. It was as if he was in a dream where the omniscient observer is compelled to react, but some resilient force impedes him mute. He was supine in the capability of grappling those fractional images cemented in his mind's eye: the wiffle ball, a sewer pipe, restraint to a gurney, and the divine awe of a cathedral bell tower all intervene in the embolism of the aftermath.)*

### **Helen Keller—The Existential Nature of Deafness, Blindness, and Muteness**

The multiply- afflicted Helen Keller, whose ontology is marked by a desperate wrath of biting, kicking, flailing, and braying, perpetually gropes for an immersion into humanity through the obliteration of blindness, deafness, and the incapability of oral speech. Helen's physical deprivations can only be comprehended coexisting with Annie's methodology of self-edification through discipline. The dispossession of her senses subject Helen to a volatile autonomy bereft of any physical and familial extrinsic relationships.

Helen's mother, immersed in maternal pathos, is the only member of the family who understands Helen's fabricated signs for interpersonal communication: Helen taps the doll to be accommodated with buttons for eyes, Helen brushes against her cheek for her mother's

assistance, Helen holds her mother's rocking embrace of arms to calm a tantrum, and mother points Helen's finger toward the house for shelter. "Kate sees Helen as a beloved child who is vanishing day by day into an impenetrable world of darkness and silence" (Spitz 104). Her imposed confinement induces a perception of self-rage, and the experience of defeat from the failure to assimilate in human society. Helen formulates all ideas and images about her external world by means of touch. However, there is an inexplicable exigency for Helen to efface her cognitive sub-development and degradation in communication by mimicking the speech she can feel in the vibration of her mother's utterance. When Helen capsizes the cradle as the baby topples out, chaos envelops the household. Gibson's stage directions denote the significant psychological and philosophical extremes in human consciousness associated with the cruelty of deafness and blindness.

Helen's fingers have fluttered to her mother's lips, vainly trying to comprehend their movements...[Mother] holds Helen struggling until we hear from the child her first sound so far, an inarticulate weird noise in her throat such as an animal in a trap might make; and Kate releases her. The second she is free Helen blunders away, collides violently with a chair, falls and sits weeping. (Gibson 15)

Helen's system of gesticulation as a pragmatic form of social intercourse does not suffice for her. A higher domain of cognition is burgeoning inside her or as Annie characterized it, "That inside it's waiting. Like water underground" (Gibson 105). It is the roots of this subliminal self that foreshadows her cognitive birth.

Alexander Meshcheryakov, a Soviet psychologist, authored a text entitled, *Awakening to Life*. In it, he describes his research on the development of cognitive functioning in the deaf-blind child. With a singular disability, the child can rely on the other senses to compensate. However,

with deaf-blindness, reality is created through the tactile experience only. The author summarizes the complexities and ramifications of instruction for the deaf-blind child.

The deaf-blind child possesses a normal brain and potential for normal development.

However, while possessing that potential he can never achieve even the most insignificant degree of mental development relying on his own efforts. Without special instruction, such a child remains a complete mental cripple for the whole of his life. (Meshcheryakov 20)

Annie provides Helen with this principle of didactic instruction. The painstaking hours of touching objects, fingerspelling their names so that Helen can mimic the letters of the deaf alphabet back to Annie's palm are reinforced in the hopes that comprehension would occur. However, this methodology, for the most part, is made capriciously inconsistent because of familial intrusion. So, when Annie pleads with the family to not disrupt the limitations in progress she has made prior to the "water" miracle, the expectation is that Helen will "see" in the sense of comprehending linguistics. It is Annie's locus of pedagogy fused with an unyielding discipline that will extricate Helen from cognitive abasement, achieve harmony, and reverse isolation. This is what makes Helen's existence discernable. In a lecture entitled, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Jean Paul Sartre refers to the concepts of individuality and authenticity as elements of one's truth and relationship to one's environment. Sartre delineates:

The authentic human being identifies his existence as well as his consequential anguish.

This human being knows that existence is the freedom and takes steps toward accepting the responsibilities for his freedom. He makes values which guide him in finding the right path as he avoids pretexts and excuses. (Sartre)

In parallel ways Helen and Annie both experience this consciousness of existence with respect to their disabilities. Annie must elevate herself to a purpose with significance. Her mission is to teach language to a blind and deaf child so that she can achieve what Sartre characterizes to be an “authentic and individual” (Sartre) state of being. Helen acquires humanism as she inhabits self-realization with the transcendence of blindness and deafness through the education of language. Helen is predetermined to surpass profound obstacles and acquire a psychic illumination without limits. This “authenticity and individuality” (Sartre) endowed Helen Keller as a harbinger of the disabled with the foreshadowing of prevalent external influences for deaf-blind education.

The classic water scene is revelatory with respect to the advent of Helen’s independence through language, knowledge, and the redemption from a fettered past. Gibson describes a moment of juxtaposition in which Helen’s mother synchronously discovers and surrenders her child.

Kate, facing Helen in her direction by the shoulder, holds her back, holds her back, and then relinquishes her. Helen feels her way across the yard, and when her moving hands touch Annie’s skirt, she stops. Then she holds out the keys and places them in Annie’s hand. (Gibson 118)

Despite the contiguity that develops between teacher and student following the water pump scene, the presence of existential despair is still formidable. Helen will always realize the tragic embodiment of her fated affliction. Her prescribed existence impinges upon psychic evolution and development. Helen’s disabilities inflicted at such a young age has resulted in an existentially broken self-esteem. Questions surface regarding the dependency Annie imposed on Helen thwarting the illogical reality of self-sufficiency, the inevitable social isolation, and the

unacceptance of her limitations. Mary Klages observes that, “Keller would begin to grasp, on the most basic level, that her physical comfort depended on Sullivan’s will” (Klages 205). In a previous confrontation with Captain Keller, Annie reinforces vehemently:

I want complete charge of her day and night, she has to depend on me for everything, for the food she eats, the clothes she wears, fresh air, yes even the air she breathes, whatever her body needs it is a –primer, to teach her out of. It’s the only way, the one who lets her have it should be her teacher. (Gibson 74)

It is indisputable that disabled people have difficulty trusting others; it is an innate form of self-preservation. Despite the sentimental overarching theme of love that Gibson predicates, Sartre’s acknowledgment of responsibilities available to individuals involves recognition, and in the end, individuals are responsible for their choices. However, from the perspective of the pedagogy of the deaf blind, Helen would never have achieved her latter accomplishments if it weren’t for this interdependent relationship with Sullivan—her teacher, interpreter and confidante. The insurmountable cruelty of three disabilities makes Helen a victim of an unfathomably merciless suffering. Sartre believes that every human suffers from anguish as a result of their individual existence. He comments:

Existentialists like to say that man is anguish. Human beings maintain internal anguish naturally which could be overlooked by neglecting the human condition and closing eyes to the human destiny and the meaning of life. (Sartre)

At the initial meeting with Annie, Helen explores this stranger with her fingertips: hair, forehead, face, and then hesitates as she becomes intrigued by the sunglasses. Annie complements the greeting with a gentle hand gesture to the face, which Helen rebukes in quixotic resentment.

Helen manifests an embarrassment of her differences in the self-effacement of Sartre's anguished self to the distinct exhortation of assuming an abled self. The intricacies associated with the development of language, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as social interactions, are often rebuffed with avoidance by the disabled; since, physical defects instinctually elicit a litany of anxieties and an uncomfortable projection.

Alfred Adler examines the role of structural deformities in early childhood. He concludes:

Physical defects, whether congenital or acquired, invariably cause feelings of inferiority.

We recognize the fact that children who have been treated as stepchildren by Nature have an entirely different attitude toward life and their fellow creatures from that of those to whom the joys of existence were vouchsafed. It may be stated that as a fundamental law that children who come into the world with organic defects not only struggle with the facts of existence but with the suppression of their social feeling as well. (Adler)

Therefore, it is indisputable that Helen's deafness, blindness, and muteness did cause psychological traumatization, deficits in cognitive expression, and social maladjustments. Scenes depicting the arduous repetition of nouns via the deaf alphabet convey Helen's latent cognitive abilities. Initially, Helen's perception is essentially a memorization process. However, it advances with the epiphanic water representation as a transcendence of cognitive deprivation to the hierarchy of meaning and synthesis.

### **Sarah Norman and the Culture of Deafness**

Although the triumvirate of visual, auditory, and aphasic impairments circumvented Helen Keller's cognitive and social development, this is not the case with Sarah Norman from *Children of a Lesser God*. Sarah is a recalcitrant advocate for the disability of deafness as a culture that



purveys an unequivocal language of perception, insight, and truth. Although tragically shut off and left to solitude, her monolingual identity of expression through American Sign Language (ASL) is an intelligent mode of concretization and abstraction. Sarah's ineluctable identity and psychological stability calculating self-assertion, create an equilibrium polemically counterpoise to the status-quo edicts of conformity to the hearing world. The Sarah persona is the harbinger for the deaf culture's vehement protest against the hearing stereotype that deafness is a handicap that needs an antidote, and the rebuff of empirical discrimination and exclusion sanctioned from the hearing multitude.

The play explores an atypical teacher-student relationship between Sarah, the protagonist, and James Leeds, the abled speech pathology teacher as antagonist. He acts as a conflicting impulse to Sarah's apostasy of deafness as affliction. She is a member of a "a linguistic and cultural minority whose complex history, language, and literature warrant sustained recognition" (Bauman and Drake 22). Leeds's proposal for assistance in the solicitude of the query, "Wouldn't you like to be able to function in the hearing world?" (Medoff 17) means steadfast conformity.

This orthodoxy takes its form through the acquisition of lip-reading skills as well as voice and articulation. Sarah's essence is ASL, a repudiation of any form of spoken language discourse. In an article entitled, "A World of Signs," a reviewed work of the text, *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* by Oliver Sacks, the reviewer relates that, "For many deaf persons, particularly among the more militant ASL is their declared language of choice" (Oppenheim 9). With truculent integrity, Sarah raises the pertinence of existential and ideologically based questions regarding cultural and disability assimilation. In one of the inevitable contentions that exist between the abled as hearing and the non-abled as deafness, is the divergent philosophy

that, “essence precedes existence” (Sartre). Sarah ponders the notion of inalienable freedoms, the existential reality of being disabled, and the exclusiveness of her self-identity.

Why can't the hearing world learn my means of communication? You want me to be a deaf person so you can change me into a hearing person. You want me to hate being deaf so that people can feel sorry for me; when all I want to be is just me. Until you let me be an I, you can never come into my silence. (Medoff, 57)

For Sarah, the coercion into the hearing world undermines the integrity and solipsism of the deaf self.

Leeds, similar to Annie Sullivan, exercises a tenacious tutelage for his students to learn to speak and lip-read. At the outset, Sarah is cynical to his methodology rooted in self-aggrandizing altruism. In fact, she detests his motives, dislikes the fact that he is a hearing person, and disdains other students who speak, by cynically mimicking their exaggerated lip movements. She admits she doesn't want to learn to speak or lip read; since, she doesn't want to project the affectation of a hearing person. Mainstream clinical psychologists would suggest this reluctance to acquiesce is a manifestation of self-hatred. She views the pressure to assent as a sense of betrayal to the deaf culture, the defining essence of her being. The social identity approach with respect to one's affliction sustains Alfred Adler's discourse on compensating for imperfections while still striving for significance. He explains:

It is the feeling of inferiority, of inadequacy, of insecurity which determines the goal of an individual's existence. We cannot judge any individual without drawing a comparison between his goal of dominance and the quantum of his social feeling. (Adler)

In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley discusses characterization as one of the many foundations to theater. He believes that the modern dramatist is not consumed with traits and idiosyncrasies, per se, of a character, but instead concerned with the idea that, “fate is wholly inside men, and this will yield at best the psychology of the celebrated individual” (Bentley 35). Sarah Norman vouchsafes credence to this principle with unwavering integrity and unabashed conviction.

It is Sarah’s innate fate to champion the perpetuity of the deaf culture with their own values, code of conduct, and traditions. Families are responsible for the passing of culture to their offspring. The deaf children are at a disadvantage from their hearing parents since they can’t rear them with appropriate socialization and American Sign Language (ASL) skills, the sole communication modality of the deaf. So, when Sarah retorts that it has always been others’ interpretations, usually wrong, of whom she is, she is referring to her need for the mutually exclusive supportive deaf community, who would not judge her or try to cure her, but values her deafness. Characterization poses many rhetorical inquiries with respect to the disabled’s existence. In particular, there is a common psychological denominator of submissiveness among people afflicted with disabilities. Sarah is atypical of this subservient personality that most disabled individuals possess, partly from survival and partly from being deprived emotionally. She supersedes the barriers of inferiority, sacrifices sharing her life with a man for her individuality and independence, virtues that only the deaf culture can allocate. If a relationship means control and a denial of herself and her deafness, then Sarah wants nothing to do with it. This makes her a heroine for the disabled culture. Perhaps Sarah, despite her organic differences, does not need the social experiences and social competencies that Adler speaks of that are beneficial to the disabled. She will only engage in the pathology of interaction with the non-

disabled when they conform to meet her non-hearing ideals. Eric Bentley writes about the role of thought and feeling as interdependent attributes in the dramatic process. He believes:

No subject is more beclouded with prejudice than the subject of thought (intellect, ideas).

The trouble arises from the modern tendency to separate thought and feeling, and want one without the other.... Philosophic thought-thought about the great issues, matters of life and death has its own peculiar pathos, and the dramatic poet is free to exploit the fact. (Bentley 65)

Sarah's presumption that the pure deaf philosophy of self-discovery is the only viable conviction, establishes her as a cerebral defender of the disabled. She operates as an afflicted prophet, who incites the hearing world into acknowledging the complex, personal, and social issues the deaf must arduously confront daily.

### **Laura Wingfield: The Ontology of Escapism**

Unlike Sarah Norman, who endorses the reality of disability as both a moral and political paradigm, Laura Wingfield internalizes disability as a shameful stigma. The brittle duality of an illusory sensibility juxtaposing an ineluctable adjustment to sordid reality evokes a disturbing portrait of the disabled identity as social tragedy. Laura Wingfield inhabits an isolated abstraction in a place immured by two extremes: the cruel reality of her existence as an old maid cripple, and the effulgent illusion manifested by devotion to a hobby collecting delicate glass ornaments. Scholar Bert Cardullo decodes the essence of her core as a "physically as well as emotionally fragile woman whose unearthly ego has been brutalized by life" (65). The inherent roots to Laura's maladjustment stem from her mother's affectations of nobility coupled with delusions of mythical romance. Amanda is Laura's domineering mother who has an urgency to

exercise a dogmatic work ethic for herself and her children. One day she confronts Laura about her disappearance from the Rubicam's Business College, where she was formally enrolled. Amanda discovers from a school official that Laura must have been that "terribly shy little girl who retched from nervousness and subsequently never returned" (Williams 407). Amanda's frantic pleas for answers to Laura's whereabouts, Laura's lack of direction, and the potential for mother and daughter's economic demise, leave Laura emotionally apathetic. Laura was then prompted to respond in the typically guileless manner of a child.

I went in the art museum and the bird-houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately, I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers. (Williams 408)

Laura's casual response to her mother's chiding suggests an oblivious, regressive level of personality functioning, one of avoidance to social conformity, a negation of the exigencies associated with maturity and the responsibility of adulthood. Laura is motivated by a sensibility that encounters reality in a destitution of avoidance. Tennessee Williams reveals that a childhood illness left Laura with one leg shorter than the other, while the other leg is bound to a brace. "It was so hard for me, getting upstairs. I had that brace on my leg—it clumped so loud! I had to go clumping up the aisle with everyone watching." (Williams 450). As a result, Laura's grasp of reality is opaqued and marred by the emotional deviations resulting from her disability. In "The Psychology of the Physical Handicap," Lawrence Edwin discusses the mutually dependent relationship between physical defects and psychological adjustment:

Physical defects catalyze more anxiety for the disabled individual because they tend to have social psychological implications, invite the attention of other persons and may force the handicapped individual to explain or even defend his physical status. (Edwin 20)

Laura responds to her mother's convoluted hopes for her to be a businesswoman or a married woman with the solid reiteration that she is crippled. The mother minimizes the severity of her defect in a response that controverts and trivializes Laura's perceptions, thereby waxing the fallacy of reality. When Laura entered the classroom late, and she walked before her classmates with the obtrusiveness of leg braces, she mastered the art of self-rejection. The effect of this humiliation gravely affected her ability to socially interact.

The arrival of the gentleman caller initially concedes Laura with an auspicious incandescence, then diminishes her to quintessential desertion. It is habitual for the disabled to convey physical reactions of panic in social situations for fear that the focus would be on the self and the related disability. Freud's classic claim, that physical symptoms have interior meanings relative to the unconscious, supports this observation. Laura's psychosomatic episodes will always proliferate. The anticipation of Jim as the potential prince proved to be an unrequited false alarm for Laura. So, Laura reverts to the numbing comfort of rejection and abasement. Those afflicted with physical aberrations are often doomed to experiencing a lack of intimacy. Laura is left physically and emotionally vulnerable to an austere world anesthetized in a desperate hopelessness.

## **Conclusion**

Characters are an essential component in the structure of the drama genre. They emerge as operatives in an explicit dimension of conflict among forces. Opposition surfaces from antagonists, external realities, antecedent conditions, and the inevitability of fate. The disabled

characters presented here are stigmatized with physical distinctions that accompany their struggle to be vital and valued. A repertoire of developmental, cognitive, and emotional variables reveals the disabled character's aspiration to supersede stereotypes, oppression, and a plethora of barriers that preclude their inclusion into humanity. As a disabled autoethnographer, the perceptions expressed about the quartet of afflicted female characters propose a subjective and self-reflective analysis that stems from an organic empiricism of discovery.

The implications of the psycho-social aspects of disability through these characters shed light upon the ubiquitous nature of interactions between the abled and the disabled. Low vision impairment, deafness, deaf-blindness, and the damage to limbs appraise these characters' identities as they are coerced into coping, and forced to confront themselves as members of a disenfranchised population. The remarkable motivation of a disabled teacher 's unyielding pedagogy ossifies the message of *The Miracle Worker*. Annie Sullivan is called to transform the monstrous abyss inhabited by Helen, a blind, deaf, and mute lost soul into the essence of redemptive enlightenment through language, is a testimonial to the powers of a formidable spirit. Gibson's psychological inquiry into the isolation of Annie and Helen, two visually denied individuals, convey a dynamic of introspective and extrinsic sentiments about disability as a social deviation. Sarah Norman's chastisement of the hearing world's social expectations for deaf conformity through speech and lip -reading ameliorates the magnitude of deafness and American Sign Language as a revered culture. As a harbinger for the disabled, Sarah credits her deafness not as a restriction in physical and social commonality. Instead, it is an opportunity to enrich her identity. Laura Wingfield resorts to the recurrence of illusion as a salve for a frayed mobility. Like Albert Camus's Sisyphean probing of the human condition, the disabled must consistently resist the ravages of a siege sabotaging their existence.

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