

# Representations of Intellectual and Cognitive Disabilities, Gender, and Sexuality in Film

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## Abstract

The representation of intellectual and cognitive disability in film and television has increased quite a bit over the years, and with that increase, certain tropes have started to develop and become more normalized over time. This paper will look at specific tropes involving cognitive disability and sexuality through the representation of disabled characters and people in the 1939 film *Of Mice and Men*, the 1999 TV show *Freaks and Geeks*, and the 2024 reality show *Love on the Spectrum*. From the 1930s through present times, the trope of naivety for cognitively disabled people in romantic contexts has persisted. Furthermore, the trope of femininity for cognitively disabled men has created a dissonance between femininity and disability when projected onto women with cognitive disabilities. Overall, these tropes work to perpetuate a distance between intellectual disability and sexuality through the added factor of gender expression.

## Background

Before diving into the particular tropes involved in these films and shows, it's important to understand the context behind each piece of media. To start, *Of Mice and Men* was originally published as a novel in 1937, and the story follows George and Lenny, two farm workers during the Great Depression. A couple of Lenny's main character traits are that he has an undiagnosed cognitive disability, that he's a very large and strong man, and that he enjoys nurturing small animals and petting smooth things, which is contradictory to his intimidating stature. They meet the owner's son, Curley, and his wife (who is unnamed throughout the book), and George warns Lenny to stay away from Curley's Wife because she's promiscuous and perceived to be a danger to Lenny. The scene analyzed in this text is Curley's wife's death scene, in which she offers for Lenny to touch her hair because he likes touching soft things, the moment escalates, and then he accidentally snaps her neck because he's unaware of his own strength.

*Freaks and Geeks* is a teenage drama that takes place in the 1990s, and it follows the story of a high schooler named Lindsay Weir as she struggles to fit in and find her place

in school. The first episode features a character named Eli who has a cognitive disability, and Lindsay stands up for him when he's been rejected by two girls after asking them to the homecoming dance. Lindsay's way of standing up for Eli involves asking him to the homecoming dance in order to silence his bullies. The scene in which Lindsay asks Eli to the homecoming dance is the part of the show that this paper will dive into.

Lastly, *Love on the Spectrum* is a reality dating show that features people on the autism spectrum, and narrates their experiences with dating and relationships. The episode discussed in this paper highlights a woman named Dani and her experience with getting ready for a date. Dani wants to explore her own sexuality, but is unsure of her partner's beliefs and value systems regarding sex, and this conflict is shown through her getting ready process as the scene starts with her reading sexually explicit titles out loud from a book about sex and dating.

Each of these films or shows features a character with a cognitive disability and involves some expression of romance or sexuality. There are two problematic tropes that are developed and maintained through the representation

of these characters including that of the “naive disabled person” in romance, and the “feminized disabled man”. These two tropes perpetuate harmful narratives that put distance between disability and expressions of sexuality.

### **Trope of Naivety**

The idea of naivety for disabled people in romantic contexts is implied through Curley’s Wife’s death scene in *Of Mice and Men*, through the way in which she is killed and the script choices leading up to that moment. For example, early on in the scene, Lenny is explaining that he likes the feeling of soft objects, and Curley’s Wife chuckles and states “You’re goofy. But you’re kind of a nice fella. Just like a big baby,” (Milestone, 1939). This shows that Curley’s Wife sees Lenny as more of a child than an adult, which infantilizes Lenny’s character, and implies that Curley’s Wife has a stronger idea of the social context of the scene due to Lenny’s childish additions to the conversation. Furthermore, the general context of the scene situates Curley’s Wife as knowledgeable and promiscuous, and Lenny as naive and unaware of her intentions. Curley’s Wife offers for Lenny to pet her soft hair, and while her intentions are somewhat ambiguous, Lenny seems to be unaware of that ambiguity, and doesn’t see the gesture as potentially romantic. Curley’s Wife’s knowledge of the possible romantic undertones of the gesture and Lenny’s lack of knowledge are then situated as dangerous for both of them as the scene with Lenny accidentally killing her. So not only is Lenny portrayed as childlike and naive within the context of romance, those traits turn out to be dangerous for him because his innocence contributes to the accidental murder of Curley’s Wife.

On a similar note, the trope of the “naive disabled man” in romance is also perpetuated through the representation of disability in *Freaks and Geeks*. During the scene where Lindsay asks Eli to the homecoming dance, the prioritization of Lindsay’s character instead of Eli positions Lindsay as a savior and Eli as naive or childlike. The start of the scene shows Eli getting rejected by two girls after

asking them to the dance, but Lindsay witnesses the scene and when she starts walking over to him, the camera starts following her and the scene essentially shifts to Lindsay’s point of view (Feig, 1999). This switch in point of view says a lot about which character’s storyline is more important, and it shows that the viewer is supposed to sympathize with Lindsay’s position as a savior and thus Eli’s position as the person being saved. As the scene progresses, a couple of bullies knock Eli’s books out of his hands and make fun of him after he was rejected by the two girls. Lindsay then stands up to the bullies and asks Eli to the dance as a method of defending him. After Eli excitedly says yes to Lindsay’s offer, she half smiles at him, and then she breaks eye contact with him and her face flickers into a nervous expression that one could even describe as a grimace (Feig 1999). This further promotes the idea of naivety on Eli’s part because it’s clear in Lindsay’s expression that she isn’t enthusiastic about going to the dance with him, but he remains oblivious to her feelings. So not only are his actions naive at the start of the scene when he asks the girls to the dance and gets rejected, he’s also naive to Lindsay’s intentions of saviorism. While this naivety isn’t necessarily portrayed as dangerous, the trait is still portrayed as unsafe when combined with disability due to the bullying that Eli is subjected to and his apparent need for Lindsay to intervene. The trope of naivety implies that Eli is at his safest when Lindsay takes over the direction of the scene and asks him to the dance, thus deeming Eli incapable of having agency over his own romantic expressions.

Finally, the reality show *Love on the Spectrum* also perpetuates ideas of naivety and disability through the infantilization of disabled people in romantic and sexual contexts. To elaborate on this idea, the visuals shown paired with Dani’s voiceover during the scene of Dani getting ready for a date create a separation between disability and sexuality through the infantilizing of Dani as a person. At the start of the scene, a voiceover of Dani reading chapter titles from a book about sex starts playing, and the audience

sees several different visuals including a shot of Dani's bedroom, and the many stuffed animals placed on her bed. While the camera is fixed on the stuffed animals the audio includes two chapter titles read in Dani voice including "Striptease Fantasies" and "Tips and Tricks and Licks" (Holden, 2024). The childlike image of stuffed animals on her bed is juxtaposed with the sexually explicit titles that she's reading out loud, and this dissonance contributes to a feeling of discomfort for the viewer when disability and sexuality are put together in the scene. A bed without stuffed animals might invoke an understanding of maturity for Dani, but the image of the stuffed animals infantilizes her, and it makes the expression of her sexuality through the voiceover seem wrong or uncomfortable to the viewer. The image combined with the voiceover implies childlike or even infantile traits for Dani, and both of these traits should not be paired with sexuality which thus presents an idea of wrongness for her expression of sexuality. Although, this scene doesn't necessarily represent the combination of disability and sexuality as inherently dangerous, it does represent this combination as awkward or uncomfortable, and the viewer is likely meant to sympathize with those feelings of uncomfortability.

To summarize the trope of the "naive disabled person" in romance as represented through these 3 sources, it's important to note that the tropes had different implications for different periods of time. The original film for *Of Mice and Men* came out in 1939, and while this representation of disability as innocent was rather progressive for its time, it did create the notion that expressions of romance and sexuality should not be pursued by people with disabilities because there would be dangerous outcomes for everyone involved. This representation created its own Foucauldian "regime of truth" which persisted throughout time and can be seen through the representation of disability in *Freaks and Geeks* and *Love on the Spectrum* (Hall, 1997). *Freaks and Geeks* aired in 1999, and the representation of Eli as naive and innocent is reminiscent of the representation

of Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. The idea of disability and romance as dangerous is still prevalent through the representation of Eli, however the stakes are lowered from death and murder to bullying and ridicule. The stakes are then lowered to uncomfortability and awkwardness through the representation of Dani as childlike and naive in *Love on the Spectrum*.

While the combination of disability and romance is portrayed as less and less dangerous as time goes on, that idea of danger which originated from the *Of Mice and Men* 1930's still has an impact on media to this day. In Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976), he explores the ways in which sexuality is constructed by society and that the repression of sexuality is an exercise of discursive power. This theory applies to the evolution of discourse surrounding disability and sexuality, because it outlines how this theme of repression is socially constructed and it becomes more widely accepted through consistent media representation and perpetuation. The representation of disabled people as naive or childlike in romantic contexts creates a specific narrative that determines disability as separate or distant from expressions of sexuality. This discourse of disability and sexuality is also circulated through the trope of the "feminized disabled man" which manifests itself in all three examples.

### **Feminization of Disabled Men Trope**

Moving away from the ideas of naivety and danger, the trope of the "feminized disabled man" in romance pops up in *Of Mice and Men* through the conversation and death scene with Lenny and Curley's Wife. Lenny's character is essentially demasculinized based on the representation of his life goals and interests in the scene where he interacts with Curley's Wife and then accidentally kills her. At the beginning of the scene, Lenny and Curley's Wife both start describing some of their aspirations for the future, and Lenny explains that his ideal life involves raising rabbits on a farm with George. This aspiration for existing outside of the workforce nurturing other beings was likely seen

as a feminine trait at the time, and Lenny's identity as a disabled person paired with this distinctly feminine life goal demasculinizes his character. He goes on to say "I just like to pet nice things. Smooth things," (Milestone, 1939), which shows that his goals include becoming a caregiver to animals and being able to pet them because he enjoys their smooth texture. Curley's Wife then agrees with him and states that she also likes smooth textures, which feminizes this trait on Lenny's part, and creates an association between femininity and disability for the viewer. Furthermore, because Lenny has been represented as both childlike and feminine, the viewer is meant to feel a sort of dissonance between both disability and sexuality, and femininity and sexuality. Again, this representation was likely very progressive for the time in which the movie was released, but it still created the trope of the "feminized disabled man" and this harmful stereotype about disability and femininity, and the relationship those identities have with expressions of sexuality. This trope was reproduced in many years to come, and it continued to contribute to the implied dissonance between disability and sexuality.

The representation of Eli in *Freaks and Geeks* does similar work to *Of Mice and Men*, as the typical gender roles of the time are flipped through the ways in which Lindsay and Eli are portrayed in their scene together. Towards the end of the scene, Lindsay asks Eli if he wants to go to the homecoming dance with her, and he responds with "Yes! Yes, I do. Yeah, please..." (Feig, 1999), and this makes it clear that Lindsay is standing up for Eli by publicly asking him to the dance, and that he's very grateful for her efforts. This episode was written in the 1990s, and the general norm for the time was that men courted women and that boys were supposed to ask girls out to high school dances. Although it's probable that some women were defying this standard by 1999, this show still exists in a time when the dominant narrative was that men courted women. This scene reverses typical gender roles for who is supposed to ask who to a high school dance because Lindsay asks Eli out,

and he's supposed to be grateful and excited because of her courting efforts. However, this gender role reversal likely wouldn't have happened without the added factor of Eli's disability, because Lindsay wouldn't feel the need to stand up for him and defy typical gender roles if he weren't being bullied due to his identity as a disabled person. Similar to the intentional shift in point of view from Eli to Lindsay, this scene also displays a shift in gender expectations due to the added identity of disability, which contributes to the looming narrative of disability and sexuality as two separate concepts that shouldn't line up. The implication of Lindsay asking him to the dance was that the only way for this expression of romance to be safe was for Lindsay to step in and save Eli, and for her to assume a masculine role in their interactions. However, even in that situation, Lindsay's facial expressions throughout the scene make it clear that she doesn't have genuine interest in Eli, which reinforces the idea of wrongness for disabled people in romantic contexts.

To change gears a bit, in *Love on the Spectrum*, the trope of the "feminized disabled man" doesn't present itself in its usual form, but it does have an effect on the scene in which Dani is getting ready for her date. As previously mentioned, the visuals at the start of the scene display Dani's bedroom, while a voiceover of her listing sexually explicit titles plays in the background. After this part of the scene, the next clip actually shows Dani sitting on her bed, reading more of the titles out loud. While she's reading these explicit titles, such as "Skin Teasing" and "Erotica and pornography" (Holden, 2024), the viewer can observe very feminine aspects of her bedroom such as her purple bedsheets, a pink floral poster above her bed, and a candle on her nightstand. The feminine backdrop juxtaposed with the words that Dani is saying implies a contrast between expressions of femininity and expressions of sexuality, and the viewer is likely to pick up on that contrast. This leads to the perpetuation of the idea that expressions of sexuality are incongruent with femininity and disability, which is an

idea that is likely influenced by the trope of the “feminized disabled man”. Just like Lenny’s representation in *Of Mice and Men*, in *Love on the Spectrum*, romance and sexuality are represented as wrong when paired with a feminine, disabled person. Similarly, the feminized representation of Eli in *Freaks and Geeks* implies that he isn’t able to participate in the typical romantic gender roles of the time, which continues the representation of disability as separate from expressions of sexuality. Just as the audience is meant to feel uncomfortable with Lenny and Eli in romantic contexts due to their “feminine” traits, the audience for *Love on the Spectrum* is meant to feel uncomfortable with Dani’s expressions of sexuality due to her identity as a disabled person and her feminine nature.

Essentially, the trope of the “feminized disabled man” was perpetuated through the representation of Lenny’s nurturing goals in *Of Mice and Men*, and the swap of gender roles by Lindsay and Eli in *Freaks and Geeks*. Moreover, as disabled women start to gain representation in film and TV, the idea of feminizing disabled men plays into the ways in which femininity is represented for women with disabilities. In *Love on the Spectrum*, Dani’s femininity is positioned in contrast with her explicit expressions of sexuality which is reminiscent of the contrast between femininity and expressions of romance for Lenny and Eli in the earlier forms of media. The trope of the “feminized disabled man” has existed in film for almost a hundred years, and although its form changed in order to fit into modern representations of disabled women, its implications were still the same. On the issue of representation, Alan Nadel writes that when “Repeated at sundry sites, in sundry forms, a group of narratives become cogent,” (Nadel, 1997). The intersection of femininity and disability are positioned in contrast with expressions of romance and sexuality in all three pieces of media, and that message remains cogent throughout time due to the consistent repetition of the “feminized disabled man” trope.

## Conclusion

In summary, the representation of cognitive disabilities in romantic contexts can be very harmful in film, and this can be seen through the creation and perpetuation of the “naive disabled person” and “feminized disabled man” tropes in regards to romance. The trope of the “naive disabled person” developed over time as the implications of it evolved from danger to discomfort surrounding the idea of disabled people in romantic expressions. Furthermore, the trope of the “feminized disabled man” remained persistent in romantic film plotlines for disabled characters, and when cognitively disabled women started to gain more representation in TV, this trope began to impact their portrayal and the ways in which their femininity relates to a viewer’s often negative perception of disability and sexuality.

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