

A Life of Her Own (1950) and Disability

By Joseph Mulkerin

On September 1, 1950, *A Life of Her Own* was released by Metro-Godwin Meyer. The film was directed by George Cukor and stars Lana Turner as Lily James. James is an aspiring model from a small town in Kansas who migrates to New York City with the hope of finding success. Shortly after her arrival she befriends Mary Ashlon. Ashlon is a one-time cover girl herself whose career is now in decline due in no small part to her penchant for drugs and partying. James and Ashlon meet by chance in the lobby of a modeling agency where James has just landed a successful audition and they become quick friends with Ashlon taking on the role of a mentor. Over drinks she opens to Ashlon about her childhood in depression era Kansas; a childhood beset by poverty and the loss of her parents at a young age. She goes on to describe how these early traumas were only made worse by living in a small town where everyone knew the intimate details of them. "You figure every time they look at you, they're adding up how many times your family was on relief. People used to say to me 'Lily, you've got your father's eyes.' I always thought they were saying to themselves, look who he was, the town drunk." This conversation provides crucial insight into James's character and suggests that in coming to New York she hopes to trade the stifling conformity of a small town for the comparative anonymity of a big city where nobody is aware of her past. The friendship between Lily and Mary Ashlon is tragically short-lived. It quickly becomes apparent that Ashlon is tormented by her fading star and loveless relationship with emotionally abusive advertising executive Lee Gorrance. Less than a half hour into the film she kills herself. Lily is briefly devastated by the loss of someone she considered a friend, in one shot we see her standing on a street corner with a forlorn expression on her face.

Lily eventually becomes a successful cover girl and becomes romantically involved with a married businessman from Montana, Steve Harleigh whom she meets through an acquaintance, Jim Leversoe, who is Steve Harleigh's lawyer. Eventually their blossoming relationship gives way to tension and Steve confesses that in addition to being married his wife is paralyzed from the waist down due to injuries sustained in a car accident in which Steve was the driver. Lily eventually moves out of the women's hotel that has a 10:00 pm curfew for visiting with men into a big apartment of her own. It is inferred that her lover shares this apartment with her when he is in town on business. Lily throws a big

birthday bash for Steve in her apartment and every room is overflowing with drunk and dancing people, but Steve is not there because his wife, Nora, has shown up in NYC to visit her husband on his birthday. We are introduced to Nora and her helper, Smitty, having birthday cake with Steve in their hotel room. Nora is in a wheelchair but at one point she gets out of it using canes and walks a few steps, so it appears that she has some hope that her paralysis may not be permanent. Steve shows up later at Lily's party and they have a brief quarrel in which he confronts her on her drunken behavior and then they bemoan their fate because of his married status. The next day Lily hatches a plan to confront Nora and tell her everything with the hope that it will lead to the dissolution of her marriage to Steve. Before going through with this she visits Jim Leversoe to inform him of this scheme. He reacts with outrage and strongly discourages Lily from doing this because he says it is immoral. Jim Leversoe (who is also an old friend of Nora's) and Lily go to the hotel to see Nora and find her lying on the floor because she has fallen out of her wheelchair. The image of her lying on the floor is reminiscent of the painting *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth which represents a known cultural image of a disabled person. Jim helps Nora back up into her wheelchair and then disappears to the hotel lobby while the two women have a heart-to-heart talk. Nora guesses that Jim and Lily owe their visit to her to announce their marriage. Lily tells her that is not the reason for their visit and then Nora guesses correctly what Lily wants to unburden. Nora gently lets her know that Steve is her man, and she needs him more than Lily does. Lily gets it and does not fight but now accepts her fate of losing Steve. In the next scene she is in a bar and the sleazy Lee Gorrance tries to pick her up. She blunts his advances, while their back-and-forth 1950s noir dialog continues. There is an ending shot that shows Lily looking up at the building where Mary ended her life, and we know that Lily's fate will be different because she is stronger and will be able to make for herself "A Life of Her Own."

Initial reviews of the film were mixed. Writing in the New York Times, Browley Crowther lambasted the film, suggesting that it was hackneyed and the product of a less sophisticated time. "Somehow while watching this picture, with its cliches, its lush inanities and its vacuum sealed preoccupation with the two-bit emotions of one dame it was difficult for this reviewer to believe the film was made in the year 1950 and with the world in the state that it is. Pictures like this were the fashion fifteen years ago when the screen and it's candy munching audience were in a much more infantile

stage.”^[1] He had harsh words for Turner herself as well. By contrast The Hollywood Reporter gave the film a glowing review. Turner was praised for a performance which achieved “intelligent depths and sympathy is with her all the way.” The review did concede that the story was not particularly novel, arguing that the premise was “familiar to shop girls for generations” but argued that the movie succeeded despite this owing to the “durability and the finesse” of producer Voldemar Vetlugin.^[2] If box office receipts are any indication, audience sentiment tended to favor Crowther’s viewpoint. The film is widely considered to have been a commercial failure.

It's worth noting that one thing the positive and negative reviews have in common is that all fail to make note of Nora’s disability. This oversight is perhaps a reflection of societal attitudes at the time and the invisibility of the disabled. Although the United States had had a wheelchair bound president a mere six years prior to the film’s release, FDR’s handicap was by his own choosing seldom acknowledged by the public. During his presidency he only allowed himself to appear publicly in a wheelchair on two occasions, once in 1936 when he gave a speech at Howard University and again while visiting wounded soldiers at a hospital during World War II. FDR’s unwillingness to acknowledge his handicap except under these select circumstances is an example of what historian Paul Longmore has described as the “medical model” of disability which forces the disabled person to conform to the outside world as opposed to making the outside world accessible to the disabled person.¹ Even though FDR did not acknowledge his disability publicly, he signed one significant piece of legislation which significantly benefited the disabled with the 1935 Social Security Act which provided income support for disabled people. The act did nothing however to address discrimination faced by many people with disabilities who otherwise were capable of working yet struggled to find and keep work when they obtained it. Even those whose impairments were relatively minor faced hurdles to employment the able bodied did not. Florance Haskell, an early disability rights activist described having been “politicized and radicalized” when she was asked to submit to a physical examination before obtaining a job simply because she had suffered from a relatively mild case of polio when she was young. The parents of children with disabilities oftentimes hid their children away owing to fear that discovery would lead to institutionalization.

¹ “The Disability Rights Movement, From Charity to Confrontation.” Fleischer, Doris. Pp 4

It was not until disability activists in the 60s and 70s began to introduce a new model referred to now as the Social Model of Disability with its main emphasis on access that the paradigm began to shift. In 1970 Judith E Heumann's application to become a New York City public school teacher was rejected by the board of education simply because she was confined to a wheelchair. The board argued that her disability represented a fire hazard simply because it would render her unable to shepherd children to safety in the event of a fire. Heumann's plight received attention in the media and attracted the attention of two prominent civil rights attorneys who offered to represent her in court. Before the case ever made it to trial however the board of education relented and accepted Haumann's application to become a teacher. The incident had garnered her national attention and she took advantage of this to create Disabled In Action, a group which successfully lobbied for the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which prohibited discrimination in federal hiring.² They also engaged in direct actions such as a protests of municipal bus systems in New York and San Francisco which were inaccessible to the disabled.

Coinciding with this growth in activism was an explosion in pop culture of movies featuring disabled characters in which their disability was central to the plot. In the 1980s a spate of movies about disability were released including *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *My Left Foot* (1989), *Rain Man* (1988), *Born on the 4th of July* (1989), and *Mask* (1985). A 2015 article in the Washington Post noted that in the 27 years since Rain Man's theatrical release just over half of best actor nominees had received their award for playing characters with a disability.³

In 2020 Andrew Pulrang, a journalist specializing in disability issues, wrote an essay in Forbes Magazine in which he identified five common stereotypes of disabled characters in films which he considers offensive and ableist.⁴ In the following paragraphs I will analyze each of the stereotypes he cited and provide examples of movies in which each is present. Then I will return to the plot of *A Life of Her Own* to see which ones can be seen in the character of Nora Harleigh.

² "The Disability Rights Movement, From Charity to Confrontation." Fleischer, Doris. Pp 1-13

³ Welcome, Eddie Redmayne: Since 'Rain Man,' majority of Best Actor Oscar winners played sick or disabled. Washington Post. February 23, 2015.

⁴ "Disability Movies Aren't What They Used To Be. That's Good!" Pulrang, Andrew. February 13, 2020

The first stereotype which Pulrang cited was that of “The Angry Bitter Wheelchair User.” This character is bitter over the hand that fate has dealt them and will oftentimes lash out at those trying to help them. Tom Cruise exemplifies this in the movie *Born on The Fourth Of July*. In one poignant scene he returns home inebriated from a bar and furiously curses his mother out. The second is the “mythical blind person who is able to see more than sighted people.” *The Book of Eli* is an archetypal example of this. It features Denzel Washington as the titular lead character who roams the country on a spiritual journey with a godlike character guiding him along the way. Third on Pulrang’s list is “The childlike and virtuous retard whose simplicity confers goodness on those around them.” Few movies embody this better than *Forrest Gump*. Jenny and Lieutenant Dan struggle with addiction and PTSD but each experience a redemptive arc by the end of the movie which stems solely from their relationship with Forrest who though chronologically a middle-aged man retains the innocence and simplicity of a ten-year-old boy. The fourth stereotype identified by Pulrang was one in which the disabled are portrayed as “selfish, demanding to be catered to without considering other people’s needs, or else self-denying, insisting that friends, family, and lovers “go live their own lives.” The wheelchair bound main character in the 2004 Irish movie *Rory O’Shea Was Here* is a good example of the selfish subtype. He frequently instigates fights with strangers and breaks the law under the assumption that his condition will allow him to get off scot free.

Lastly Pulrang identified what he considers to be the most pernicious of all, the “Better off dead” stereotype in which “a disabled person fights for the right to kill themselves, while the film encourages audiences to see this wish as rational or even selfless.” According to Pulrang this is perhaps the most common of the five and a myriad of examples seem to prove him correct. The most prominent and famous example of this stereotype seems to be in the 2004 Clint Eastwood movie *Million Dollar Baby*. In the movie’s climax boxer Maggie Fitzgerald (Hillary Swank) suffers a near fatal spinal injury which leaves her quadriplegic and dependent on a ventilator to breath. The movie ends with her former trainer Frankie Dunn (played by Eastwood himself) reluctantly fulfilling her request to assist her in committing suicide in an act of mercy. When the film was released, it was greeted with condemnation from the Disability Rights

Education Fund which argued that it perpetuated the notion that a disabled person's life was "unquestionably not worth living."⁵

Film critic Paul Drake offered an in-depth look at this stereotype in his 2010 essay "No Life Anyway" in which he closely analyzed the 1981 John Cassavettes movie *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*⁶ The movie tells the tale of sculptor Ken Harrison (Richard Dreyfuss) who after becoming quadriplegic in a car accident fights for the right to die. The opening scene of the movie is set prior to the accident. In it Harrison is depicted as a happy man, enjoying both career success and a loving relationship. Almost immediately however the film takes a dark turn as Harrison suffers nearly fatal injuries when his car is turned upside down by a truck. After being rushed to the emergency room and undergoing emergency spinal surgery he survives but discovers that he will be confined to a hospital bed for the remainder of his life. As soon as he learns this, he ceases to find any value in life and pushes away anybody who tries to persuade him otherwise including social workers, doctors, even his fiancé. In one heartbreaking scene he insists that she leave him because he genuinely believes there's no possible reason she'd ever want to remain a couple other than pity. In this he embodies the self-denying disabled person which gives the movie some overlap with that earlier trope mentioned by Pulrang. The remainder of the film concerns Harrison's ultimately successful legal battle for his right to leave the hospital and die. The unique perniciousness of this trope becomes even more apparent when one considers its origins. The 1941 movie filmed in Nazi Germany entitled *I Accuse (Ich Klage An)* tells the story of a young doctor who assists his multiple sclerosis stricken wife in killing herself. After being brought up on murder charges he makes an impassioned plea for the law prohibiting euthanasia to be eliminated, arguing that it limits the ability of physicians to help those who are suffering.⁷ In the film the character is merely advocating that voluntary euthanasia be legalized, however it's crucial to understand the larger context. By 1941 the Nazis had already been in power for eight years and in that time thousands of disabled people had already been involuntarily sterilized including the blind, deaf, epileptics, the mentally handicapped and

⁵ "Million Dollar Baby Built on Prejudice about People with Disabilities." <https://dredf.org/2005/02/13/million-dollar-baby-built-on-prejudice-about-people-with-disabilities/>

⁶ No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film. Drake, Paul pp. 97-107

⁷ Death with dignity became the murder of 250,000: [FINAL Edition 1] Sobsey, Dick. Edmonton Journal; Edmonton, Alta. [Edmonton, Alta]. 28 Sep 1994: A13.

those with birth defects. Nor was the practice limited to people who suffered physical or mental handicaps but anybody whose affliction was considered heritable such as alcoholics. In the course of this time period the German people had repeatedly been inundated with propaganda geared towards presenting the disabled as “useless eaters” who burdened the taxpayer while doing little more than consuming scarce resources. A title sequence at the beginning of a 1936 “documentary” film entitled *Hereditary III (Erbkrank)* about the condition of German asylums took the argument one step further and suggested that allowing the handicapped to live constituted a crime against nature. “In the natural world, in the divinely ordained struggle for existence they would have become extinct at the start. Against all the laws of nature the unhealthy are cared for disproportionately, while the healthy are neglected.⁸” In 1939 the Nazis implemented the T-4 program, codenamed “Mercy Death” which by the end of the war resulted in the murder of nearly 275,000 disabled people. In the early stages of the program the Nazis pioneered the method of extermination via poison gas later used to kill Jews and Roma in the final solution.⁹ Given this origin it’s perhaps fitting that the “better off dead” trope was brilliantly subverted in a subplot of the 2013 Amazon Prime series *Man in the High Castle*. *Man in the High Castle* is based on Philip K Dick’s 1962 novel of the same name and depicts a world in which Nazi Germany emerged victorious in World War II and conquered the eastern half of the United States, setting up a Vichy like government in the process which administered Nazi policies including the extermination of all non-Aryans and the disabled. In Season One John Smith (Rufus Sewell) discovers that his son Thomas is suffering from an incurable degenerative disease and therefore must necessarily be euthanized by law. At first, he attempts to conceal this from Thomas and hatches a plan which potentially would allow him to escape and live the remainder of his days outside the clutches of Reich law enforcement. Before he gets a chance to implement this plan however Thomas learns of his condition and dutifully reports himself to a local state administered asylum to be euthanized.

For the character of Nora Harleigh we can obviously rule out the second and third stereotype. She has an average or above average level of intelligence and isn’t blind. When the audience is first introduced to her in the midst of a private birthday celebration with her husband she’s portrayed as

⁸ Burleigh, Michael. *Death and Deliverance: “Euthanasia” in Germany c. 1900-1945*. pp 184-85

⁹ Lifton, Robert *The Nazi doctors: medical killing and the psychology of genocide*. pp 71-72

cheerful and optimistic. There's nothing remotely selfish about her. If anything, it becomes clear that on an emotional level he may depend on her far more than she does on him even need her more than she does him. As they chat, he expresses anxiety about the slow pace of business, his new mining operation is running slower than expected and his bank loan is due next month. When she asks if he expects the situation to improve by then he simply grimaces and says, "if we're lucky" to which she smiles and reassures him that "we always have been, haven't we?" This brings a smile to Steve's face and he refers to her affectionately as "the old silver lining kid." Nor does she exhibit any behavior which could be said to even remotely be viewed as self-denial. From cake and champagne with her husband to coffee with Lily and Jim she clearly seems capable of finding pleasure in the small joys of life in the company of able-bodied people. It could be argued that on a subtle level perhaps the role she plays as emotional support wife to Steve to dampen his work-related stress is a form of self-denial, that perhaps she's repressing her own pain for his sake. The undeniable chemistry and love between them however seem to suggest otherwise. It also seems like it would be virtually impossible to find a disabled character who embodies the "better off dead" stereotype less than Nora Harleigh. Throughout both scenes in which she appears her attitude is consistently one of cheerful optimism and she comes across as someone who genuinely seems to enjoy life in spite of the hand which fate has dealt her. She even maintains the hope that her condition may improve as evidenced by her eagerness to show Steve that she's regained the ability to walk a small number of steps.

While Nora herself does not inhabit any negative stereotypes of disabled people several of the supporting characters; particularly Lily but to a lesser extent Jim Leversoe seem to have some degree of belief in them. When she informs him of her plan to break up Nora and Steve's marriage he expresses considerable outrage, not merely at the immorality of the scheme itself but specifically over the fact that she intends to break up the marriage between a man and a disabled woman. "It'll kill her" he warns Lily. The underlying assumption seems to be that Nora would be incapable of enjoying any sort of life independent of Jim but given her characterization thus far this seems unfair to her. The movie has already established by this point that Nora is an amazingly resilient person. If Steve decided to abandon her and begin a new life with Lily, she would be heartbroken but provided she received a fair share of alimony to be able to continue affording her nurse and physical therapy there's no reason to believe she

wouldn't be capable of bouncing back. Given that she's already survived one life altering setback I think it's fair to say that she's a much stronger person than Jim is willing to acknowledge. Despite these misguided assumptions however Jim's intentions are fundamentally good. Lily comes off looking far worse morally in the scene. For her, Nora's condition is the reason to break off the marriage. She argues that Steve has "forgotten what it is to be happy" and tries to rationalize her plan on utilitarian grounds, suggesting that "right now three people are miserable, this way only one will be." There's a darker subtext here which she doesn't seem willing to acknowledge. Given her assumption that Steve and Nora's marriage couldn't possibly be a happy or genuine one based merely on Nora's disability it would stand to reason that she additionally doesn't believe that Nora is capable of having a happy marriage with anyone or a happy life of her own at all. Thus, it seems that on some level she agrees with Jim's assumption that tearing her away from Steve would be tantamount to murder.

In some ways the movie's strength lies in the fact that it's not primarily about Nora's struggle but about Lily's growth as a person. In a movie told primarily through Nora's perspective and the struggles with her disability it would have been much easier for it to fall into the trap of perpetuating one of the harmful stereotypes. Instead, her disability is central to the plot largely because it serves as a rationalization for Lily to justify something she otherwise would find unconscionable, breaking up Steve and Nora's marriage. She's in love with Steve and in denial about the fact that he loves his wife far more than he ever could love her, so she deludes herself into believing that he's only staying with Nora out of pity. When she approaches Jim to tell him of her plan, he sees right through it and serves as the moral conscience of the movie.

"Going to any woman and smashing everything she lives for, that's wrong." By the end of the movie she's forced to accept that she can't in good conscience break up what is a loving marriage and that she indeed does have to strike out and live "A Life of Her Own."

[1] BOSLEY C. "THE SCREEN IN REVIEW: LANA TURNER AND RAY MILLAND SEEN IN 'LIFE OF HER OWN,' AT CAPITOL THEATRE." New York Times Oct 12 1950

[2] "TURNER SCORES IN WOMAN'S DRAMA 'LIFE OF HER OWN': TEARS AND ROMANCE IN CELLING SAGA." The Hollywood Reporter (Archive: 1930-2015) 110.17 (1950)

[3] Morella , Joe, and Edward Z Epstein . Lana: the Public and Private Lives of Mrs. Turner , The Citadel Press , New York , NY, 1971, pp. 127–127.

[4] Fleischer, Doris Zames, and Frieda Zames. "'Wheelchair Bound' and 'The Poster Child.'" The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation, Temple University Press, 2011, pp. 3

[6] Fleischer and James, pp.9

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