

No Pity, Just Punchlines: Analysing Disability and Humour in John Callahan's Cartoons

Disability and humour share a complex and often uneasy relationship, shaped by social norms that traditionally discourage laughter directed at physical or cognitive difference. Laughter in such contexts is frequently perceived as cruel, inappropriate, or ethically suspect, reinforcing the assumption that disability must be approached solely through lenses of sympathy or solemnity. However, humour theorists have long argued that humour functions as a critical tool for exposing incongruities, power relations, and social contradictions, making it a particularly potent medium for engaging with disability. Despite the growing presence of disability humour as a form of resistance and activism, it remains an undertheorized area within both humour studies and disability studies. Disabled individuals often appropriate and exaggerate common stereotypes associated with disability, transforming them into sources of humour that subvert dominant narratives and reclaim narrative authority. In doing so, humour becomes not merely entertainment but a strategy of empowerment that challenges pity-driven representations and destabilizes ableist assumptions.

Within this framework, the paper analyses the work of John Callahan, a quadriplegic cartoonist whose dark, provocative, and irreverent humour offers a radical critique of societal attitudes toward disability in the late twentieth century. Callahan's cartoons, marked by their stark visual simplicity and sharp punchlines, deliberately occupy the uncomfortable space between offence and insight. Drawing from his lived experience of disability, Callahan uses humour to expose the absurdities of ableist structures, social etiquette, and moral hypocrisy surrounding disability. His work resists sentimentalization and refuses the expectation that disabled bodies must inspire compassion or moral uplift. Instead, humour operates as both a shield and a sword—deflecting pity while simultaneously confronting audiences with their own prejudices and discomfort. By forcing viewers to laugh where they are not supposed to, Callahan destabilizes conventional frameworks of “appropriate” representation and asserts disabled subjectivity on his own terms.

This analysis further explores how Callahan's cartoons function as incisive forms of social commentary, engaging with both humour theory and disability theory to illuminate the ways in which his work contests the constraints imposed by an ableist world. By examining the intersection of disability and humour in Callahan's late twentieth-century cartoons, the paper situates his work within broader debates on representation, agency, and resistance. Ultimately, it argues that Callahan's cartoons demonstrate how humour can operate as a powerful mode of activism—one that reframes disability not as tragedy or deficiency but as a site of resilience, defiance, and self-determined identity.