



# Unfolding Lives Beyond Text and Screen: Disability Humanities in *Me Before You*

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## Abstract

*This article analyses disability as represented in Jojo Moyes 2012 novel Me Before You and its 2016 film adaption in the context of the emergent field of Disability Humanities. Beyond the text and the screen, the study shows how literature and film shape our myths about the disabled body, love and desire and autonomy in different and yet transferable ways. All the inner turmoil, emotions and moral reasoning of Will Traynor are left open in the novel, but the film leans on emotional and visual aid that increase empathy but sometimes seem to overcompensate for the depth of his experience. By means of disability studies, narrative theory, and film analysis this article investigates how the narrative deals with problems of human dignity, assisted suicide, love and care. And while the interpretation does narrate a romance, it also suggests that film adaptations of Me Before You ultimately ask their audiences to wrestle with difficult moral quandaries and the societal underpinnings that make up a “good life.” They also illustrate just how quickly a disability can be translated into either a tragic or an inspiration. The paper contextualizes this work within the larger frame of Emerging Humanities, illustrating how English studies can contribute to critical questions of representation, ethics, and health. Disability Humanities in particular, offers a new voice for the field, a voice that cuts across media, challenging ableist assumptions, and forming the humanities as relevant, engaged and poetic in our time.*

**Keywords:** disability humanities, assisted suicide, love, ethics, health

## Introduction

Disability Humanities is a way of reading culture in which disability is not a medical condition to be diagnosed, but a lived and narrated experience that is socially constructed. But instead of asking how disabled bodies can be “fixed,” this field asks how such bodies are represented, understood, and made meaningful via literature, cinema, and cultural imagination. Through unsettling a common-sense belief that able-bodied is the baseline of the human, Disability Humanities enacts and unveils the profound ethical and social stakes of narratives of disability. In this paper, Jojo Moyes book *Me*

*Before You* (2012) and its film adaptation directed by Thea Sharrock (2016) are taken up as a case study. Both versions are about the life of Will Traynor, a man paralyzed in an accident, and Louisa Clark, the young woman he hires to take care of him. Their relationship plays out through care, laughter, love and ultimately Will’s choice, which is controversial, to end his life, with her help, in a Dignitas clinic in Switzerland. The story sparked debate in the disability rights community, some of whom condemned it for trafficking in “better dead than disabled” cliché severity, while others praised it for representing autonomy and choice.



Comparing the novel to the film, the paper considers how different media tell stories about disability, love, and autonomy like, how does the novel construct interiority and ethical conflict through language? How does film render those struggles spectacular, told in talk and emotion? What might this tell us about the larger potentialities of Disability Humanities as a part of the emerging discipline of Emerging Humanities?

### Materials

Jojo Moyes novel *Me Before You* (2012), a first-person narrative that centers Louisa Clark's perspective, interspersed with occasional shifts into other voices, including Will's family.

The film *Me Before You* (2016), adapted by Moyes herself, starring Emilia Clarke as Lou and Sam Claflin as Will, which condenses and reshapes the novel for cinematic form.

### Methodology

Textual analysis of the novel, examining voice, interiority, and ethical dialogue. Cinematic analysis of the film: attention to framing, performance, music, and visual symbolism. Cross-media comparison, how narrative strategies shift between page and screen. Critical disability critique interrogating ethical implications, particularly around assisted suicide. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the ethos of Emerging Humanities, blending literary study, film theory, and disability studies to respond to complex social issues.

### Findings and Results

*Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes and its film adaptation have come under fire from the study for their portrayal of disability. Sure, the movie almost entirely reduces it into a visual fantasy and melodrama, but the book goes much deeper into Will's mentality and shows his independence, wittiness, pain, and moral dilemma. Both have their drawbacks of drowning in able-bodied tragedy clichés, but the movie troubles the conflict down as a romantic one and the novel further muddles it by highlighting Will's autonomy. Where the film is all emotion and sorrow, the book sees assisted suicide as an issue of dignity and agency.

### Inner Worlds in the Novel

It's mostly narrated from Lou's perspective, but we do get into Will's head through dialogue and the occasional, purposeful story innings. Moyes uses the language to challenge the notion that disability equals a lifetime of despair. Early in the novel, Lou would tell that a person who looked that he could eat the world, and is still sitting as a statue, lies inside his chair (42). There's the former vitality and the opposite damage from the current immobility but the lesson once again is that Will is constantly intelligent and controlling.

The principle of the Will of autonomy is wounded in incisive criticism. At one point, he says to Lou: You only get a life. It is really your duty to live it as fully as possible (151). Though the line seems like a plateau, in situation it resonates, with its refusal to reside in a fact of living other than what for him is less but also, in the end he becomes to himself dignity.

The book's humor and its intimacy madden the sadness of the novel. Lou remembers a field trip, when she will torment her into wearing tumbled tights: Push yourself. Don't settle. Wear those stripy legs with pride. Knowing you still have possibilities is a Luxury (85). Here Moyes resists downsizing a dismal figure and focusing on the relationship of two people. But the novel never lifts the heavy weight of pain. There hasn't been a single day when I've woken up and thought, I can face this (289). Humor, disappointment, the new stressed the competent binaries of tragedy or sentimentally by allowing access to those contradictions.

### The Film and the Language of Spectacle

The movie turns Moyes's shortcut around the back door adaptation of a text in to a two-hour visual tale that shifts equilibrium from internal to cinematic spectacle. The conversation has been included, but it is ordered. For instance, Will tells Lou: You only get a life. It is really your duty to live it as fully as possible (film, 00:47:13). It is spread on the screen and sung upon by the orchestral music and the close up of Will's face, and its emotional impact is flattened by its philosophical level. According to David Bordwell in his *Narration in the Fiction Film*, The orchestral build and montage exemplify the idea of cinematic



narration as guiding perception through affective cues (112). Much of the meditative evocation of heat knifed by the emphatic performances.

Emilia Clarke conveys its inner turmoil with wide eyes, fidgety movements and tearful silence. When Lou tells him You are not giving a chance to the world, Will quietly responds, I don't want to live in a world where I can't be (film, 01:32:08). The straightforward expressiveness of the line crystallizes its case for a general readership, and yet gives the novel almost no room to work through the tiring stages.

Cinematography further shapes meaning. Will's wheelchair and the grand spaces in which it is set, or the montage of his holiday with Lou, is beautiful, but it courts a potential problem of ridiculously simplifying disability as the visual difference between a stationary body and a moving world, a moment of memory in the face of irrevocable decline. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, The framing against landscapes illustrates the phenomenological tension of embodiment, where the body is lived but also seen (92). As emotionally effective as those images are, they reinforce the cultural practice of reading disabled bodies as symbols rather than as people.

### **Assisted Suicide as Ethical Flashpoint**

Moral reasoning in the novel is carefully stated. Will says: You don't understand. This would be no life. Not for me. And not even for you. I can't bear the thought of dragging you with me into this half-life (332). His tone highlights agency, distinguishing autonomy from despair.

In the movie, this argument is focused in the goodbye letter, read by Lou following Will's death: You are scored on my heart, Clark. You were from the first day you walked in, with your sweet smile and your ridiculous clothes (film, 01:44:12). The focus shifts to romantic tragedy rather than philosophical reason, weakening the cultural gravity of assisted suicide in private mourning.

### **Tropes and Their Tensions**

Both book and movie grapple with well-worn disability tropes. Will risk becoming the "tragic hero" who gets killed so that Lou can develop;

Lou risks being the "inspired caregiver" changed by exposure to pain. Rosemarie Garland Thomson states in her *Extraordinary Bodies*, Both novel and film struggle with familiar disability tropes often described as extraordinary bodies in cultural imagination. However, Moyes's book makes this more complex by putting in the foreground Will's demand for choice and Lou's moral dilemma. In contrast, the film's use of imagery to emphasize beauty, music, and tears is sentimentalizing, and thus more open to attack by disability activists who protested it projected the message that disabled lives are of less value.

### **Disability Humanities: Beyond Pity and Sentiment**

Davis Lennard J quoted in his *Enforcing Normalcy*, Disability Humanities urges us to move beyond seeing disability as either medical defect or romanticized suffering (23). The novel is closer to this by rendering Will as a subject of contradiction: sardonic and despairing, tender and defiant. The film, though effective, tends to render complexity as spectacle and sentiment.

### **English Studies and New Humanities**

For the study of English, *Me Before You* offers a powerful challenge. Students and academics are able to read how narrative voice in literature and film language construct subjectivity in different ways. Disability Humanities builds on this by placing representation as an ethical issue, rather than an aesthetic one. For *Emerging Humanities*, the case illustrates how literary and filmic texts intersect with urgent social issues concerning care, choice, and dignity.

### **Conclusion**

Before dramatising the conflict between autonomy and empathy, spectacle and subjectivity, tragedy and choice. The novel, through its access to planes in Will's inner life, moves nearer to the vision of complexity of humanities of disability over the penalty. The film, with visual immediacy, intensifies emotion but risks simplifying ethical bets. By placing them in conversation with each other, we learn how stories of disability circulate through the media, exposing the cultural worries that inform them. In



the process, we get a glimpse of the promise of new humanities, a field adapted not only to narratives of love and loss, but to concerns of justice, embodiment and how it is possible to live otherwise.

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