

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**THE TROPES OF DISABILITY IN DAVID SMALL'S STITCHES
THROUGH POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION AND NARRATIVE
DEVIANCE**

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Abstract

*This paper discusses the graphic memoir of David Small, *Stitches* (2009) as an exemplary case of graphic autopathography, basing on the theory of positive disintegration by Kazimierz Dabrowski and the theory of narrative prosthesis, introduced by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder to discuss tropes of disability. The study examines the role that the memoir takes in using narrative deviance in terms of non-linear patterns, visual metaphors, and fragmentation of the story to disrupt stereotypical depictions of illness and impairment and rebrand the existence of depressive moods and physical harm as initiators of self-growth and the emergence of greater personality. Through the visual and textual analysis of such critical aspects as silence motifs, absent eyes, and vortexes, the paper shows how *Stitches* manipulates the discourses of ableism and makes personal sufferings a place of empowerment and creative strength. The researchers use textual analysis as its main technique, is a contribution to the research areas of disability studies and graphic medicine as it emphasizes the subversive nature of the graphic narratives in the development of empathy, autonomy, and complex representation of the experiences of the disabled. Finally, the paper suggests that those memoirs are counter-narratives to misplacement, which provides understanding of how disintegration becomes transformative in the process of artistic work and identity development.*

Keywords: *Tropes of disability, disability, David Small's *Stitches*, Positive disintegration, Narrative Deviance, Narrative Prosthesis*

Introduction

Graphic autopathographies are a new genre in modern literature and visual art in which authors have used the image-text relation to document personal experiences of illness, disability, and trauma. It is this hybridity, sometimes known as graphic medicine, which enables a complex discussion of both bodily and mental experiences that may not be easily brought out through prose memoirs. Combining the sequential art with the autobiographical narrative, these works make the reader question why it is necessary to treat the subject of disability as a visceral reality and why it is crucial to go beyond the process of describing it verbally, adding visual metaphors to increase emotional resonance and subversion. The emergence of the genre can be said to be an indication of a larger shift in the culture that places inclusiveness in storytelling where disenfranchised voices reassert their agency through multimodal expression and was seen to contribute to empathy and critical thinking around health and identity (Green and Myers, 2010). Graphic medicine is not only a therapeutic means to creators but also an educative tool to teach the reader and health practitioners about subjective aspects of illness and to foster a more personal approach to medical stories (Williams, 2012). Here, one can note that graphic autopathographies become strong instruments of dismantling ableist assumptions, making authors see the invisible elements of suffering and resilience in the manner that cannot be created with the help of prose.

The topic of the current research paper intakes the literary work which is *Stitches* (2009) written by the American writer David Small. This one is one of the most remarkable concepts in the genre of American graphic memoir that narrates the life of a child with medical trauma, family dysfunction, and the consequent disability of the inability to speak after a throat surgery. Against a backdrop of repressive family structure of the 1950s, in Detroit, Small tells a story of a sadistic family irony in which the emotional instability of his mother and misinformed radiation therapy of his father (meant to cure sinus problems but actually causing cancer) culminate in a life changing operation at the age of 14. This operation deprives Small of her voice, and she is literally voiceless which symbolizes even more serious themes of silence, neglect, and loneliness (Small, 2009). Small sees the unspeakable by stark black-and-white illustrations of recurrent motifs of rage, neglect, loneliness, anxiety, discomfort and panic that beautifully serves as a tragic testament to surviving

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

with little text. The memoir not only reveals the overlaps of physical disability and psychological trauma but also expands the cogitation concerning the way that the graphic narratives represent the embodied sense of the disability geniusly and reveal the unspeakable as the visual metaphors and the fragmentation of the stories. The work by Small is the legend of the graphic memoir boom as the author presents the theme of survivorship and perseverance during familial and health challenges. Being a finalist in the National Book Awards *Stitches* uncovers the power of art of changing the traumatic experience when the voicelessness of the author is used as a metaphor of the general existential silence of dysfunctional relations and the social norms.

This paper combines the current theory of positive disintegration by Kazimierz Dabrowski, which argues that psychological crises are necessary to develop personally, and the idea of a narrative prosthesis by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, which criticizes the widespread use of disability as a literary device to drive or solve narrative. According to Dabrowski, the existence of internal struggles, including the existential depression that is illustrated in *Stitches*, is an indication of disintegrative process that dismantles lower-level personality structures, leading to higher integration, autonomy, and creativity (Dabrowski, 1964). This theory, which was developed initially within the framework of personal growth and overexcitabilities, especially in gifted people, redefines suffering, nervousness, psychoneuroses not as an illness, but as a form of stimulus to personal growth and awareness on a multilevel level. In literature, positive disintegration may be used to clarify how characters or authors work through crises in order to achieve self-actualization, as in literature of emotional development, disintegration can highlight the positive aspect of suffering. In a complement to this, Mitchell and Snyder posit that disability is often prostheticized in literature as a way of introducing deviance and to achieving normative closure, but that graphic memoirs such as Small resist this by seeking ambiguity and embodiment (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000). In their theory, they construct a narrative structure in understanding the widespread nature of disability as a tool of characterization, which has frequently worked on it to indicate social or moral deviance in an attempt to rectify or eliminate it in achieving plot closure. This prosthesis is destabilized in graphic novels by visual and structural deviance that enables the presentation of more subtle images that disrupt reliance on ableist discourses. Disability in *Stitches* is not only physical but a metaphorical concept of voicelessness and trauma that makes the traditional narratives more complicated and brings out the conflicting effects of such depictions in graphic trauma narratives.

The development of the field of graphic fiction based on medicine and mental health, which has been popularized by researchers such as Ian Williams and MK Czerwiec, also reflects on the therapeutic and educational value of such memoirs, which makes these works a tool of ethical person-centered medicine (Williams, 2012; Czerwiec et al., 2015). In *Stitches*, Small uses black and white illustrations to show memory, dream and silence in fragments breaking the rules of linear storytelling by means of wordless panels, transmitting the burden of unspoken truths. This strategy does not only resist the ableist stereotypes that disabled people are passive victims but also redefines the concept of existential suffering as the way to self-actualization. The concepts of neglect can be traced throughout the story, as the family relation of Small shows how emotional abuse adds to physical disability but the artistic form of the memoir turns these factors into a place of power. Profound inner fantasy dreams and secrets, which are depicted in visual form, accentuate the presence of the ethical identity and decision-making in the memoir and extend the use of the narrative theory in ethics literary criticism. Moreover, *Stitches*, to an extent, deals with the politics of disability representations, where the graphic form enables to critique the medical authority, the power structure within a family, imagining disability not as a deficit but as a way of seeing human vulnerability.

In writing about *Stitches*, the present paper contends that graphic autopathographies are subversive space, through which narrative deviance, or the breaking of traditional structure and form, enables the reconsideration of disability as an empowering, as opposed to a deficient, space. Moreover, the discussion highlights how aesthetics in the memoir changes self-destruction into artistic output, as a way of empathizing with the readers and breaking social norms about sickness. Finally, *Stitches* is an example of that graphic pathography boom with illustrated hope in the face of truth and politics of disability and it has led to the continued discussions in disability studies and comics studies. This paper is going to shed light on these dynamics, to give a subtle insight into how such narratives construct disability, a connection between word and image that establishes the unspeakable as seen. In this discussion, the paper aims to bring together the

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

theoretical perspectives and textual analysis, which can help us understand how the memoir has contributed to the discussion and discussion on trauma and resilience as well as the redemptive nature of artistic narration even under crisis.

Conventional literary and cultural figures such as disability are often minimized to a representational instrument, a kind of narrative prosthesis that encourages the plot to move to a normative resolution without giving the disabled subject a chance to exercise agency (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000). Through this prostheticization, stereotypes are reproduced in which illness and impairment is always tragic, deviant or inspirational and thus othering the experiences of complex lives led by people with disabilities. The visual representation of physical injury and existential depression in the genre of graphic memoirs such as *Stitches* aggravates this problem because pictures may strengthen or disrupt voyeuristic looks either through creative narration or through creative narration.

One of the issues is the pathologization of existential depression that is connected with disability, and that is usually considered only in negative terms, without the potential of changing positively (Dabrowski, 1964). Small depicts this conflict in *Stitches*, he describes the trauma of childhood caused by radiation-related cancer and voicelessness as a result, providing an understanding of how the silence of the family and medical intervention increase psychological pain. Nonetheless, the critical critique of these writings often dismisses the role of such narratives in the use of deviance as a means of opposition to ableist discourses, and draws its attention to the superficial issues of suffering. This blind spot restricts the interpretation of graphic autopathographies as anti-narratives facilitating self-actualization. The issue is especially urgent in the conditions of America, where individualistic values introduce the isolation of the disabled experience to a new level, and the need to explore the way in which *Stitches* redefines the concept of disintegration as the source of independence and imagination, as well as interfering with the prosthetic exploit of the disability in literature.

Literature Review

In the last 20 years, the academic discussion of the topic of disability in graphic narratives has enlarged considerably with the focus on the specific powers of the medium as visualizing the embodied experience and disrupting the normative narrative. The intersection of comics with health humanities is known as graphic pathographies, penned by Green and Myers (2010, p. 574), which allows patient-centered representation and gives less emphasis on being clinical and less emotional. The method has played a central role in the area of graphic medicine, where comics are drawn upon to discuss illness stories and build empathy in the readers, healthcare professionals, and patients (Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 12). An example of early precedents is photographic autopathography by artists such as Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence who photographed their illnesses as a way of reclaiming bodily agency through medical objectification and changing personal suffering into resistance (Couser, 2001, p. 79). These pieces of work provided the foundational base of new graphic memoirs where visual elements are interrupting with the old tropes of illness, i.e. the "overcoming the illness" narrative, which treats the experience of a disability just as a personal victory over the hardship (Frank, 1995, p. 115).

Mitchell and Snyder (2000) *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* is still considered an archetype in disability studies because it makes the argument that literary work is mostly based on a crutch of disability to bring deviance and close the narrative, thus continuing the ideologies of ableism (p. 47). This paradigm presumes that the devices of narratives somehow prostheticize disability to salvage plot tensions as a symbolic tool and not investigate the complexities of living with a disability (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 49). This idea has been expanded into graphic novels, in which the images are used to reinforce this dependency, frequently introducing the use of disabled bodies to indicate maleficence or compassion without giving such bodies complete agency (Foss et al., 2016, p. 5). To use just one example, disability is often used as a narrative prosthesis to motivate emotional narratives in comics, but in graphic memoirs, the narrative revolves around deviant forms that do not find norm-conformist solutions (Joshua, 2017, p. 1). It has been used on all kinds of genres including sensation fiction as the disabled bodies are symbolic of social dangers or failures of morality (Mossman, 2009, p. 23). Building on this, graphic memoirs disrupt this by adopting narrative deviance non-linear form, visual disjunction and metaphorical imagery that places the marginalized voices and critiques capableist dependencies in the center (Chute, 2010, p. 45).

This is complemented by Dabrowski (1964) theory of positive disintegration, which holds that psychoneuroses and internal conflicts are equally important in the evolution of personality, particularly to people with high developmental potential (p. 10). This theory more frequently used with gifted populations redefines depression and anxiety as overexcitabilities, which destroys the egocentric structures, allowing empathy, responsibility and self actualization to occur (Mendaglio, 2008, p. 34). It is also related to stigma theories in disability settings, with the internalized ableism resulting in self-stigmatization, but also providing a means of progress by considering crises as the drivers of greater integration (Link and Phelan, 2001, p. 367). The use of the Dabrowski theory in literature and mental health research indicates how existential depression in stories could be an indicator of positive developmental schemes, where what seemed to be disintegrating can lead to creative and empathetic results (Wells, 2024, p. 2). As an example, the phenomenon of overexcitabilities in gifted and neurodivergent persons is redefined as an advantage of multilevel development (like in disability narratives, where suffering becomes the source of resilience), (Piechowski, 2006, p. 56). Later research applies this to illness memoirs and argues that positive disintegration is a prism through which one can see how the psychoneurotic symptoms of the disabled characters or authors give rise to self-amelioration instead of just pathology (Tillier, 2023, p. 15).

The convergence between graphic medicine and disability studies also enriches this discussion of autopathographies as challenging the tropes of the tragic victim or inspirational hero by portraying illness as embodied and many-sided (Squier, 2015, p. 20). Graphic medicine takes the form of, including the Graphic Medicine Manifesto, promotion of comics as a means to re-tell stories of health, the importance of visual storytelling to humanize disability and oppose medical detachment (Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 14). This can be seen in literature, which addresses communicable diseases and severe circumstances, where graphic autopathographies demedicalize illness with subjective images, giving rise to new perceptions of bodily experiences (Venkatesan and Saji, 2025, p. 3). In addition, graphic medicine allows the use of crippling methods, incorporating disability studies to challenge the ableist systems in comics and ensure the inclusionary ones (La Cour & Scherr, 2022, p. 7). Such autobiographical comics as those about mental illness, queer experiences, and disability can be seen as counter-discourses that queer dominant illness discourses (Nagata, 2021, p. 45).

In the case of *Stitches*, analyses point to how the success of its presentation of trauma and silence is connected to disability. The article by Hirsch (2014, p. 332) elaborates on the effect of visuals created by Small, passing the trauma through the generations, by the means of graphic presentation. Researching multimodal trauma stories in comics, Brunner (2012, p. 790) also mentions that they are capable of visualizing the unspeakable through the combination of text and image to elicit visceral reactions. Wegner (2016, p. 5) criticizes the visibility of trauma and disability as practiced by *Stitches* as challenging theses concerning the efficacy of multimodal narratives in making the inexpressible visible. Koch (2016, p. 4) situates the memoir in the context of disability comics by highlighting the way it utilizes silence as an empowerment trope and not a loss. DeGracia (2013, p. 2) investigates the *Stitches* to teach narrative writing with the emphasis on the lack of text and images to make students interested in the themes of rage and neglect. The memoir can be viewed as a silent film pretending to be a book in the educational setting, where redemption is achieved through visual images of traumas (MavMatrix, 2023, p. 3). Ethical critiques, including the ones based on the brain text theory, show the way, in which *Stitches* examines identity and decisions in the context of intense psychological dreams (Ateneo, 2023, p. 10). Czerwiec (2020, p. 6) contemplates the graphic pathographies boom such as *Stitches*, and their impacts in telling the truth in narrating disability hopefully. Koch (2020, p. 8) also speaks of its application in graphic narratives as it depicts hope in face of political and personal silence. The trauma-based research highlights the way *Stitches* blends the borders of the young adult literature, and the suitability of traumatic content is questioned (Academia, 2013, p. 17). Comparison to other memoirs, such as Forney (2012, p. 50) about a mental illness and creativity and Porcellino (2014, p. 22) about resilience by being minimal, the exceptional dreamlike scenes in *Stitches* are emphasized when it comes to showing physical-psychological crossings. Thematic investigations of inexpressibility demonstrate the way the memoir overcomes silence with the help of art, turning voicelessness into the expressive healing (ResearchGate, 2016, p. 2). Other examples of visual metaphor in *Stitches*, including cancer caused by radiation, also exemplify the embodiment of trauma, which the discourse of graphic medicine addresses to health stories (Synapsis, 2024,

p. 1). In general, the literature recommends the use of combined methods that perceive disability memoirs as empowering and needs further research on visual deviance as a subversion tool and a better approach to tropes of illness.

Theoretical Framework

In this research, the two theoretical frameworks that are used in a complementary way are the theory of positive disintegration (TPD) by Kazimierz Dabrowski and the theory of narrative prosthesis by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. The theories fit well to examine the cases of graphic autopathographies such as *Stitches* by David Small (2009) because they deal with the psychological and narrative aspects of disability, trauma, and personal change. TPD offers a prism through which one can interpret existential crisis and depression as productive processes that result in self-actualization, whereas narrative prosthesis opposes the representational techniques used in literature that capitalize on disability to get a symbolic value. Collectively, they shed light on the way *Stitches* challenges stereotypical representations of illness by deviant narration, putting suffering back within the context of empowerment and greater personality growth. It is a combination that enables a subtle analysis of the process in which visual and textual aspects in the memoir change disintegration to creative fortitude, attacking ableist discourses and enabling readers to feel empathy (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 47).

The theory of positive disintegration by Kazimierz Dabrowski which was originally formulated in the 1960s assumes that personality development is a process of psychological disintegration and reintegration in which internal conflict and crises are fundamental stimulating forces towards growth (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 10). Instead of pathologizing mental distress, as was commonplace before TPD redefines psychoneuroses, which include anxiety, depression, and existential angst, as positive signs of high developmental potential, especially in sensitive or gifted people (Mendaglio, 2008, p. 34). The theory proposes five degrees of the development of personality starting with lower, more primitive, integrations and moving on to higher, autonomous, levels:

Primary Integration: This is a type of integration that is egocentric, instinct-oriented with limited self-reflection or empathy whereby, individuals follow biological and social impulses without self-dilemma (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 12).

Unilevel Disintegration: This is characterized by horizontal struggles due to external forces, e.g. societal demands or peer influences that results in ambivalence, anxiety, and superficial changes with no hierarchical values underpinning (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 15).

Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration: This is a process where there are vertical conflicts between higher ideals (e.g. empathy, authenticity) and lower impulses (e.g. self-interest), which causes the onset of deep existential depression and an inner sense of disharmony as the individual starts questioning who they are (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 18).

Organized Multilevel Disintegration: An optional and self-managed stage of the development in which the individual plunges and develops superior values through self-reflection, imagination, and ethical decisions, turning crises into personality challenges (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 22).

Secondary Integration: A harmonious, multilevel personality ideal having such traits as autonomy, empathy, responsibility, and a dedication to universal values where disintegration has achieved its developmental role (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 25).

The essence of TPD lies in the fact that five areas of the body (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, emotional) raise experiences and drive disintegration and are called overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 2006, p. 56). These hyperactivities tend to be in the form of emotional upheaval or artistic desire, which is the reason TPD is particularly applicable to artistic and literature settings where characters or writers deal with manifestations of trauma towards self-actualization (Nelson, 1989, p. 5).

TPD is applied in applications to disability studies and literature to refract the nature of such conditions as existential depression, as a frequent condition in illness and impairment narratives, as a developmental resource instead of a disease condition. As an example, disintegration was the source of empathy and imagination in gifted or neurodivergent populations, which is consistent with portraying disabled people who use their pain to create art (Mendaglio, 2008, p. 45). TPD literatures consider the character arcs on the effect of crises causing breaks in fixed self-concepts, resulting in increased integration and moral development

(Wells, 2024, p. 2). Another example of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, where overexcitabilities (e.g., imaginal in form of dream sequences) motivate the protagonist to continue on to autonomy and creative self-actualization, is the voicelessness of childhood and familial neglectedness that Small describes in *Stitches* (Small, 2009, p. 234). This application is highlighted as TPD as being extremely useful in disability memoirs, in which seemingly chaotic events presuppose the gradual advance towards an ideal of personality through empathy and strength (Tillier, 2023, p. 15).

The theory of narrative prosthesis was proposed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in their 2000 book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, and conceptualizes disability as an ubiquitous literary tool to prop up a narrative, only to frequently resolve or cure it back to some sort of a norm (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 47). The idea of the prosthesis used in reference to the way stories use disabled bodies or minds as a crutch to characterize, develop the plot, or enrich the theme, does not represent disability as a lived experience, but actually as a shorthand symbol of moral, social, or psychological anomie (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 49). This dependence demonstrates how literature in general is more dependent on disability to create its meaning, with deviant bodies propelling a story into the world and supporting ableist beliefs that aim to cure or obliterate impairment to end (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 53). Narrative prosthesis has two main functions, which are: one, as a stock aspect of characterization, in which case disability represents predetermined ideas of the character such as villainy or inspiration; and two, an opportunistic metaphorical effect, where the disabled experience is not pursued (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 47). A related term is narrative deviance where formally disrupted timelines, disrupted structures, or visual anomalies promote these prosthetic applications to expose the marginalized visions (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 20). Visual features in graphic narrative exaggerate deviance allowing counter-narratives to dominate which do not resolve and are content to be embodied (Chute, 2010, p. 45).

In disability studies, the idea of narrative prosthesis has been extensively used to review disability representations in literature, film, and media and reveal how disability props support ableist scripts and marginalize the voices of actual disabled people (Foss et al., 2016, p. 5). As an example, in a literary discourse, it examines the way in which disabled characters serve as metaphors of deviance to either disappear in the narrative or be redeemed through healing (Joshua, 2017, p. 1). They apply to modern genres, such as graphic novels, in which the agency and ambiguity are placed in the middle of the prosthesis, as discussed with trauma narrative analysis (Cachia, 2015, p. 3). In *Stitches*, the voicelessness of Small is a prosthetic tool of family trauma, yet narrative deviance, with its perversely visual effects and non-logical sequences, disrupts this, denying normative resolution and recast disability as the place of continued change (Small, 2009, p. 183; Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 50).

This paper achieves this by examining how disintegration in *Stitches* can be brought about by existential crises, which then results in deviant narratives, which reject the stereotypes of prostheses. Both overexcitabilities and deviance put forward by Dabrowski and Mitchell and Snyder focus on crises and disruptions to assist in the innovation and subversion of the two issues (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 18; Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 53). This form of synergy can be used in the context of graphic autopathographies to show disability as not a crutch, but as an agent of self-actualization, which has been a contributing factor to empowered accounts of disability studies (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006, p. 7).

The tropes of disability, Positive Disintegration and Narrative Deviance in *Stitches*

David Small skillfully uses narrative deviance to portray his childhood trauma in *Stitches* turning the graphic memoir into an act of subversion against ableist imagery. The lack of linearity, intertwined with dream episodes and no-text panels, does not follow the standard patterns of autobiographical linearity, and corresponds to the flawed nature of traumatic memory and the possibility of a complex exploration of disability that is not easy to simplify (Chute, 2010, p. 45). This transgression is reflected in the way Small is using visual metaphors to represent something that cannot be expressed in words, including the repetitive theme of missing eyes in images, where bare eyes of characters are frequently covered or lost behind glasses frames, representing the loss of connection to emotions, the dangers of his sight, and the secrecy of family silence (Small, 2009, p. 45; p. 186). Indicatively, such figures of authority as parents and doctors are portrayed without apparent eyes, which highlights their lack of empathy and the feeling of invisibility of the protagonist, which confronts the stereotype of authorizing a disabled body instead of diminishing it to a plot

device. These aesthetic decisions collide with traditional narrative to adopt ambiguity and embodiment that emphasises the act of marginalisation to illness and trauma, which are in line with wider trends in graphic medicine in which comics make subjective suffering more human (Williams, 2012, p. 22).

Using the narrative prosthesis developed by Mitchell and Snyder (2000), the disability that Small experienced, namely the loss of a vocal cord after radiation therapy and the surgery, serves as a crutch toward narration tension on its own, including the theme of familial silence, medical neglect, and emotional repression within his family structure in the 1950s in Detroit (p. 47). The voicelessness is a kind of a prosthetic effect, an act of supporting the deviance of the story in a dysfunctional family where the impairment of the protagonist is a symbol of social and moral disturbances at large without providing him/her with any agency (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 49). Nevertheless, with the aid of narrative deviance, Small breaks this prosthetic addiction and denies normative closure or cure, choosing to keep living with the trauma being sustained. One of them is the stitching wound, captured in a extreme close-up on the full-page post-operative image, presenting the readers with the harshness of physicality of disability, with emotional reactions that complicate the voyeuristic spectacles and compel the readers to look at the reality of impairment as it is lived (Small, 2009, p. 183). The same symbols can be used to signify incessant psychological disturbance, as recurring motifs such as swirling vortexes, which occur in an x-ray scene (Small, 2009, p. 28), the raving of his mother (Small, 2009, p. 47), and wearing an anesthetic mask (Small, 2009, p. 164) are regarded as a representation of domestic abuse being translated into clinical abuse and the reversal of the supposedly cessationist approach of prosthetic resolution as This strategy builds upon the work of Mitchell and Snyder to the context of graphic narratives, where the visual fragmentation is considered a way of increasing deviance to disrupt ableist ideologies defining the voices of disabled people as marginal (Foss et al., 2016, p. 5).

These narrative elements are re-conceptualized through the theory of positive disintegration by Dabrowski (1964), according to which, because the existential depression of Small is a result of the overexcitabilities of developmental aspects, then it indicates great potential to develop instead of being a symptom of pathology (p. 10). Spontaneous multilevel disintegration can be exemplified by the fact that when the protagonist cannot decide between lower and higher values (e.g. fear and expanding family dynamics versus authenticity and empathy) there arise acute crises which can be described with the help of fragmented images and dreaming sequences that increase emotional overexcitabilities (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 18; Small, 2009, p. 46). To illustrate, reference to Alice in Wonderland brings out escapist imaginations in the face of existential anxiety, which is imaginational over excitation as a survival strategy that drives disintegration to self actualization (Small, 2009, p. 46). One of the key events in the process of organized multilevel disintegration is the revelation of a lack of love in his mother by the therapist of Small which is recorded in a full-page panel of a single tear, which is the disintegration of the egocentric structures and the appearance of the sense of empathy and autonomy (Small, 2009, p. 234; Mendaglio, 2008, p. 45). Even the artistic production of the memoir is a representation of this change, with Small being able to regain his voice by way of drawings, and attaining secondary integration, a harmony ideal of personality of creative resilience where psychoneuroses are used to empathize and be responsible (Piechowski, 2006, p. 56). This is triggered by narrative deviance and the visual metaphors include crashing waves (Small, 2009, p. 120) and smoggy clouds (Small, 2009, p. 15) the embodiment of layered traumas deconstructing lower integrations, which culminate to greater awareness and self-improvement.

Moreover, the motifs of missing eyes and body injury are closely visualized using the theme of silence when seeing is dangerous and associated with annihilation anxiety, when the gaze of the protagonist is subject to punishment or revelation (Small, 2009, p. 186). Quotations like The fact that now you have no voice will define you here on in elucidate the redefinition of identity by being disabled, which is a mixture of existential depression and narrative prosthesis of how voicelessness contributes to the family secrets whereas deviance dismantles them (Small, 2009, p. 186). With the combination of trauma and disability, *Stitches* represents the theme of ambivalence in that deviance makes the unspeakable visible without resorting to clichés since the wordless panels express rage and neglect much better than words can (Brunner, 2012, p. 790). It is this combination of theories that allow us to see how the overexcitabilities of Small, who is emotional in his illustrations of panic (Small, 2009, p. 60) and intellectual in his reflective maturity (Small,

2009, p. 300) approach to the same findings fit into the prosthetic disruptions and constitute a counter-narrative of empowerment (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 53).

The physical disability and psychological traumas are also connected through the intersections of physical disabilities and psychological traumas through graphic form where the palette of black and white creates the gothic and dreamlike mood and enhances the state of existential depression (Small, 2009, p. 1-10). As an example, the moment of neglect by parents, when his mother throws the doors around or when his father takes unilevel radiation therapy, are presented with stark contrasts which signify unilevel disintegration, the conflict outside of the protagonist destroying his sense of identity (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 15; Small, 2009, p. 20). Later on, as the story develops, these aspects are transformed into spontaneous multilevel contradictions, where visual metaphors of vortexes and tears signify the transition toward the next level of values, which are creativity and empathy. Finally, *Stitches* reveals the intersection of narrative prosthesis and positive disintegration in graphic autopathographies to help us rethink disability as enabling resilience and self experience, which adds to the body of disability studies by showing the possibilities of subversive representation in the medium (Couser, 2001, p. 79).

Conclusion

With a close consideration of the example of *Stitches* (2009) by David Small, the paper has shown how graphic autopathographies can use the so-called narrative deviance to deconstruct the well-worn tropes of ableism and make real the idea of narrative prosthesis established by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2000) and situate it in the context of the theory of positive disintegration by Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964). Through the analysis of the non-linear form, visual metaphors, and disjointed descriptions of trauma, the analysis shows that Small turns existential depression and physical voicelessness, as symbols of deviance, into the devices of the great personal development and self-actualization. Narrative prosthesis as it is described by Mitchell and Snyder is the criticism of the literary crutch of disability to bring about tension and resolve plot in literature that usually advances normal ideologies that offend impaired bodies (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 47). In *Stitches* the same is turned upside down with deviant narrative structures (wordless panels, distorted angles) that do not close and rather attempt to accept the ambiguity of corporeal bodies, the dysfunction of family, and the crisis of the psyche (Chute, 2010, p. 45). Correspondingly, the provided framework by Dabrowski repackages the assumed havoc of disintegration, i.e. small overexcitabilities and existential suffering, as a constructive process of development, according to which crises break down egocentric structures to allow empathy, autonomy, and an elevated ideal of personality to emerge (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 25; Mendaglio, 2008, p. 45). This integration highlights the memoir as a counter-narrative, which spreads both personal resilience and societal sympathy to the disabled experiences in general.

The graphic deprivation, the black and white illustrations and images of indifference, desertion, and change explored in the memoir by Small can be considered as an example of the subversive possibilities of graphic autopathographies in reinventing disability. Instead of focusing on impairment as a sad end or inspirational success, *Stitches* depicts how depression at existential levels is the key to creative expression and self-actualization, which is consistent with TPD emphasizing the overexcitabilities as the source of multilevel development (Piechowski, 2006, p. 56; Small, 2009, p. 234). This disruption of the uses of prosthetics by making the protagonist the center of agency, as well as visualizing the disintegrative process, which renders abstract psychological concepts concrete and relatable, is due to the visual elements, including the repetition vortexes and the lack of eyes (Small, 2009, p. 28; p. 186). The discussed reframing is relevant to disability studies because it explains the ability of graphic medicine to represent multifaceted marginalized experiences and challenge ableist discourses that deny disabled people more than mere symbolic roles (Williams, 2012, p. 22; Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 14). Through an elaboration of these subversive techniques, it is also shown that the memoir has a further implication on ethical storytelling, in which the text-image fusion allows greater involvement of the reader, and challenges medical and family authority (Hirsch, 2014, p. 332).

To sum up, *Stitches* is a tribute to the transformative ability of the graphic narrative in the disability representation, as it provides an implicit counter-narrative, which paves the way to empathy, autonomy, and the understanding of illness that is inclusive. The results of the study highlight the importance of TPD and narrative prosthesis as a tool of interpretation of the way in which personal crises can result in artistic and

psychological empowerment (Brunner, 2012, p. 790; Tillier, 2023, p. 15). Future studies can build on this to cross-cultural graphic autopathographies and consider the impact of various contexts on the depiction of positive disintegration and narrative deviance, including non-Western autobiographical memoirs of global health inequalities (Squier, 2015, p. 20). Also, the comparison with the other American works, such as *Marbles* (2012) by Ellen Forney, or *The Hospital Suite* (2014) by John Porcellino, could be used to further enlighten the variations in how the given themes are treated to add to the scholarship of how the graphic medicine has a role to play in breaking the stereotypes (Forney, 2012, p. 50; Porcellino, 2014, p. 22). In conclusion, this paper has suggested the need to explore more on visual media within the disability studies field, in an effort to facilitate the development of inclusive discourses that humanizes the suffering and glorify the resilience, hence towards creating a more acceptable portrayal of disability life in literature and beyond (Green and Myers, 2010, p. 574).

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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